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Breaking boundaries

New Super Mario Bros U is a true showcase of what the Wii U is capable of. Using the controller screen, a fifth player manipulates the environment around the four players on the main screen, creating an all-new *Mario* experience. It's clear that the Wii U controller has potential, and historically it's Nintendo that makes the best use of the tech it creates. The question is, then, whether third-party developers can deliver this time around. With a strong launch line-up, things are looking promising.

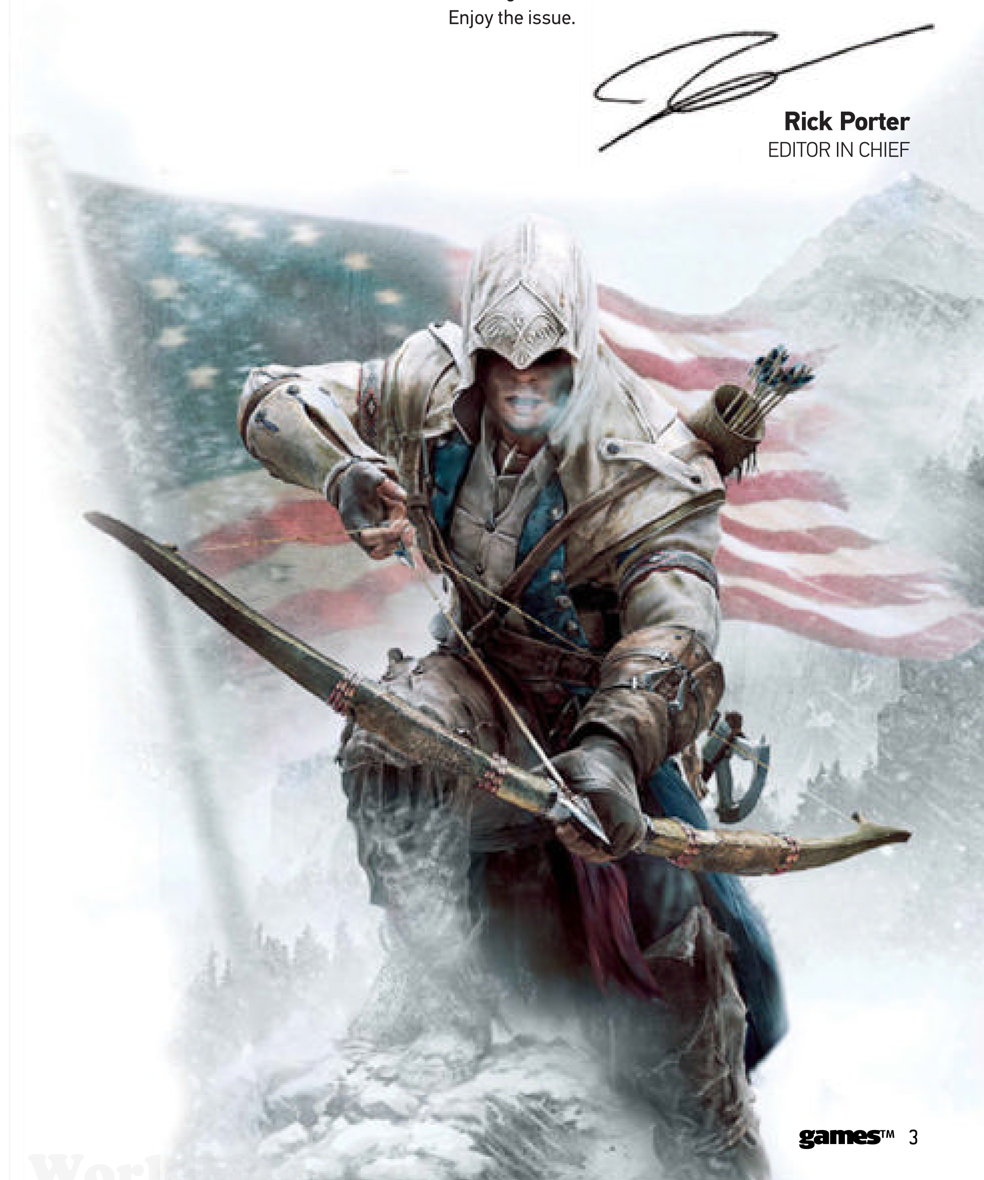
I've already put a fair amount of time into *Assassin's Creed III*. Exactly what a 'fair amount' actually equates to is usually judged more by those around you and how many responsibilities you've shirked. In this case it's about seven hours and at least three counts of shirking.

It almost feels as if it was created solely to rob me of time. The team probably had a whale of a time imagining how long it would take me simply to traverse the expansive Frontier area. It was probably even funnier when they decided that it would take near 20 minutes of knocking on a door and sleeping in stables before someone would train me to stab people. Incidentally, this is all time I don't have, yet I play anyway.

It's odd that I don't find it annoying, actually. Games have evolved to a point where in many cases immersion is required to impress, and immersion is dependent on time – even if it's mundane tasks sucking up that time, it ultimately equals immersion. Nothing puts you in a man's shoes quite like having to walk a good few hundred miles in them, after all. I do wonder how far it will be pushed as the next gen gets wheeled in and developers have the power at their disposal to make me do even more things. Hopefully it won't be too long until we find out.

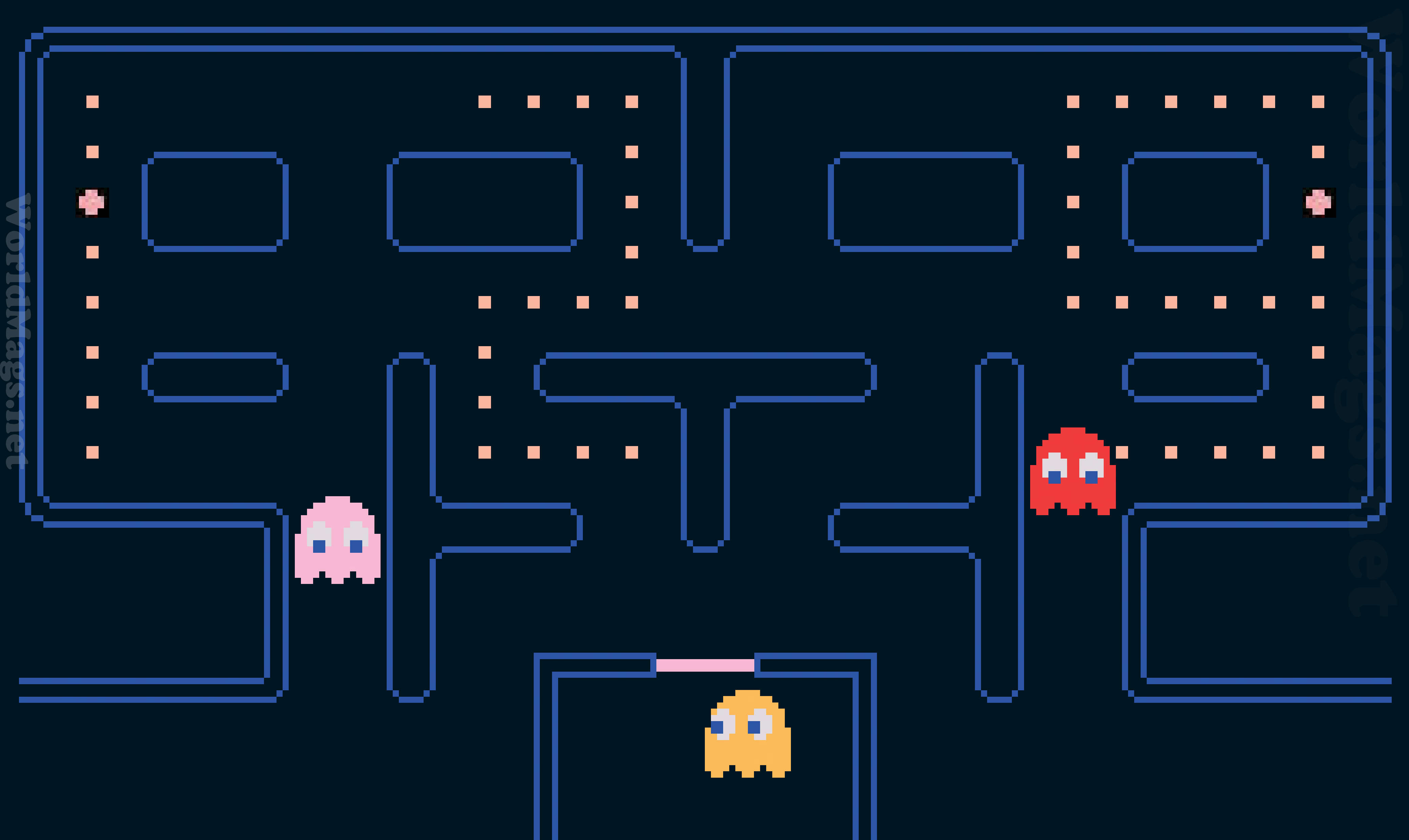
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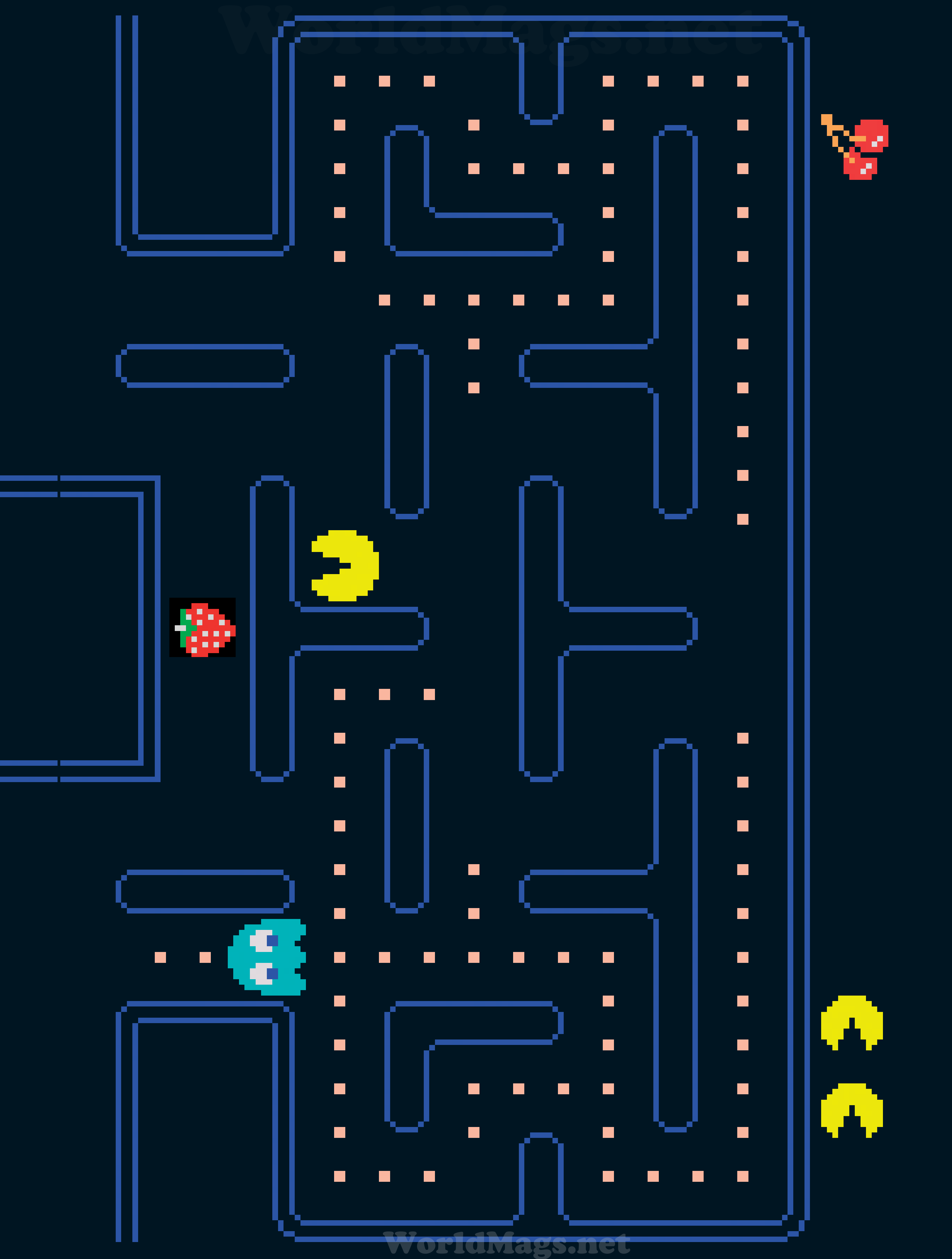
Rick Porter
EDITOR IN CHIEF



HIGH SCORE

310 310





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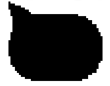


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REVIEWS

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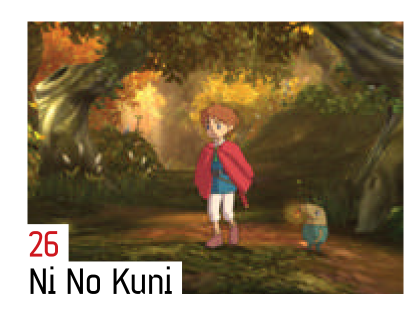
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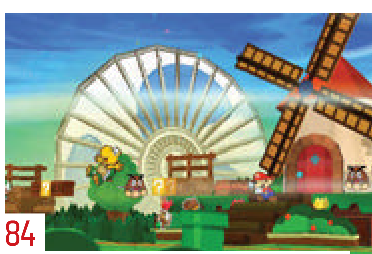
Dead Space 3

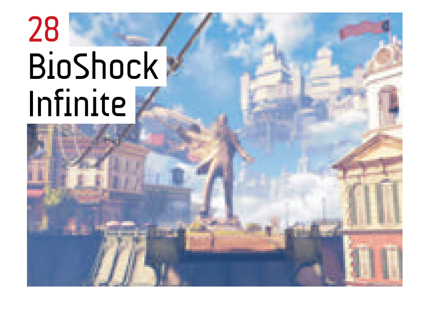
Visceral plays survival horror with friends

DISCUSS



FEATURES





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FAVOURITES



Is Sony in crisis?

→ As the company puts on a brave face in light of continuing financial troubles, Sony's woes double down as we head into 2013

Sony has been through the wars somewhat in recent years, but the last few months have seen the company taking a bit more of a battering than even it might be used to.

A 14.5 per cent drop in sales over last financial year resulted in a sales and operating revenue for Sony's gaming wing of ¥118 billion (£928 million), which worked out at an operating loss of some ¥3.5 billion (£28 million). The company blamed this downturn on both the drop in sales and an "unfavourable" exchange rate through the strong yen, while pointing out sales of both the PSP and PS3's hardware and software had taken a hit. This was offset slightly by the introduction of the PS Vita.

Yes, the Vita – the handheld that was meant to change everything for Sony and make it the economic powerhouse it once was. Unfortunately for the company, the device hasn't picked up anything like the traction its competitor, Nintendo's 3DS, has.

Sales have been flagging since day one, but there have been more than one or two weeks where the last-gen handheld, the PSP, has outsold its more powerful successor. When put up directly against the 3DS, things read even worse: Nintendo's handheld is selling anything from two to four times the units the Vita manages each and every week, according to Nintendo's figures.

If the Vita is to become anything more than a footnote in Sony's history – and believe us, it deserves to be a lot more than that – the planned aggressive marketing over the Christmas period has to be a success.

Speaking of marketing, Sony has experienced some woes in that department too. Erstwhile VP of explosions, Kevin Butler, has been accused of defecting to Nintendo. Jerry Lambert, the actor behind the Butler character, appeared in an advert for tyre manufacturer Bridgestone's Game On promotion. In the televised ad, he was seen to be playing on a Wii.

Sony went on to take the matter to court, suing Bridgestone and Wildcat Creek, the production company behind the ad, for intellectual property and trademark infringement. Not for Lambert appearing in the ads, but for what the company sees as Bridgestone using the character of Kevin Butler to promote a competitor's console.

DATA STREAM → GREATEST VIDEO GAME MUSIC 2 IS OUT, FEATURING TRACKS FROM PORTAL AND FEZ

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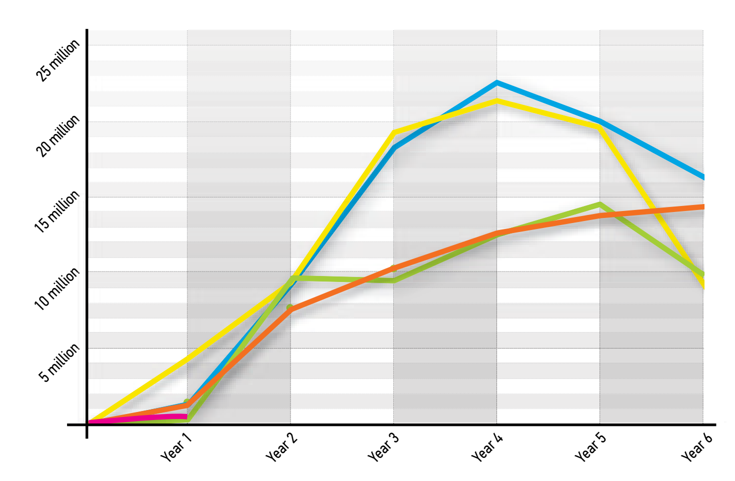
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PlayStation hardware comparison

→ A look at PlayStation hardware sales figures in the first six years





The ad has since been modified to remove Lambert, and the case is ongoing at the time of writing.

But possibly worst of all for Sony is the news that the PS3 has been victim of another hack – and this one could be unfixable. Amateur tinkerers have gained access to the LV0 decryption keys and leaked them to the hacking community, meaning, in theory, that's it for Sony's efforts to plug security holes.

Any new firmware can patch these leaks, but access to the LV0 keys – the absolute base-level of security on the PS3 – means hackers can simply circumvent these new roadblocks as and when they are put up. It can be seen as a minor positive that the hacking group behind the release did so to head off a Chinese group, which was aiming to sell the keys at a profit, but that's hardly the sort of news that will let SCE's security team rest easy.

IT'S NOT ALL bad, though. While Sony's money woes don't paint the prettiest of public pictures, the company has still managed to scrounge together ¥50 billion (£397 million) in order to become the largest single shareholder in another struggling company, Olympus.

Sony's investment bags an 11.5 per cent stake in the main operation, while also giving the company a controlling 51 per cent share in a medical electronics venture to be set up later in the year by both Sony and Olympus, with the latter holding the remaining 49 per cent.

Then there's the recent result of the lawsuit brought against Sony in the wake of the April 2011 PSN hack, in which around

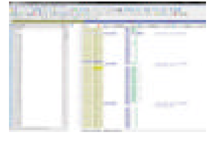
> "Use of the Kevin Butler character to sell products other than [PlayStation] misappropriates Sony's IP"
>
> Dan Race, SCEA senior director of communications



Sony's investment in Olympus is ostensibly for the mutual benefit of both companies – stability for Olympus in troubled times, and new markets for Sony to profit from.



The case is ongoing at the time of writing, but Sony is accusing Bridgestone of promoting the Wii in its adverts.



It might not be much to look at, but the leak of these encryption keys could spell doom for the PS3's security against piracy and homebrew.

75 million users had personal details compromised. While plaintiffs brought the complaint that Sony had "failed to follow basic industry-standard protocols to safeguard its customers' personal and financial information, thereby creating foreseeable harm and injury", Judge Anthony Battaglia cleared Sony of any liability and threw the case out of court.

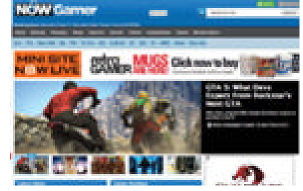
Judge Battaglia stated that since none of the named plaintiffs were paying a subscription fee for PSN access, a claim for economic loss could not be upheld unless it could be proven that Sony was in some way complicit with what was, as accepted on all sides, an outsider's criminal act.

As for the breach itself, it seems that the terms and conditions Sony presented were enough to cover the company, as an admission that "no security is perfect" was included and agreed to by all users of PSN. The court records stated: "In the presence of clear admonitory language that Sony's security was not 'perfect', no reasonable consumer could have been deceived."

It's not all smelling of roses for Sony right now – there are issues to be contended with and problems to be tackled. But it isn't all bad. In fact, it could be said that it's simply not quite perfect.

→ FURTHER READING

NowGamer.com



The perfect festive guide for the holiday season, **NowGamer.com** will have the latest reviews for all the biggest games leading up to Christmas. Alongside the usual gaggle of previews and interviews, be sure to check out guides for *Hitman: Absolution* and *Call Of Duty: Black Ops II*, so you can pretend that you know what you're doing.

All About Space



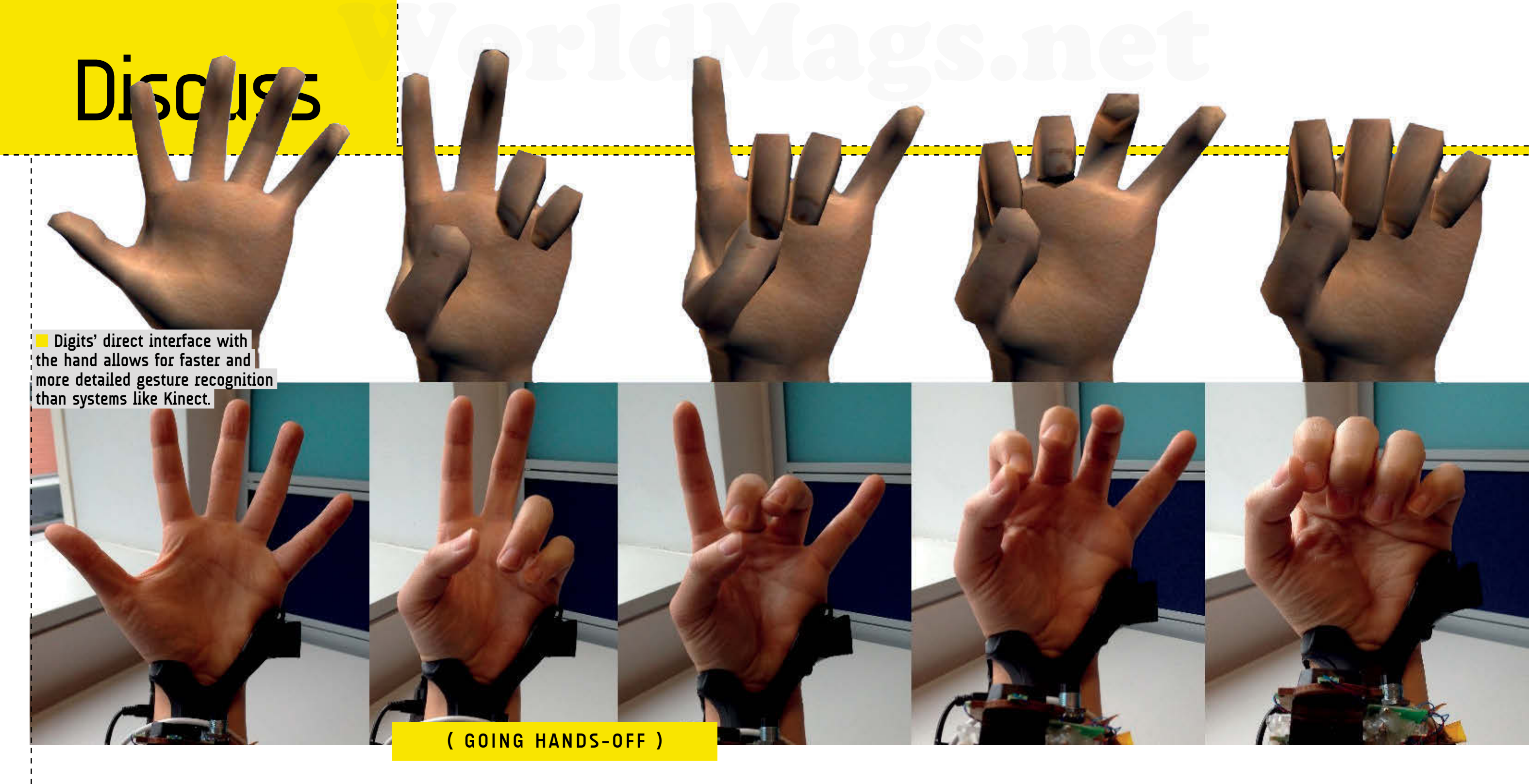
Issue 6 of **All About Space** kicks off with a look at NASA's ten finest moments, from the Moon landings to the Mars rovers. Inside you'll also discover the Andromeda galaxy, tour the alien worlds of the Gliese planetary system, see how much space junk is orbiting Earth and much more, including the small matter of an interview with the legendary Brian May. Don't miss it.

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Digits' direct interface with the hand allows for faster and more detailed gesture recognition than systems like Kinect.

(GOING HANDS-OFF)

The tech leading to Xbox 720

→ SmartGlass and Digits show a company focused on the future and willing to show us what we might be getting with the next generation of Xbox

Microsoft is ushering focus away from the gaming side of the Xbox 360 and into a wider sphere and recent releases and innovations from the company are just backing up these claims. At the same time, though, the Seattle giant isn't about to forget videogames altogether, and a number of its inventions look set to become integrated into everyday gaming life – or at least look like they *could* be.

Recently Microsoft released SmartGlass on the world – the tech that was so proudly, boringly, showcased at E3 before being instantly parodied by *South Park*'s Trey Parker. But far from retreating into its shell after the minor embarrassment, MS has merely got on with things and released the free download to the world.

The program allows users to control their Xbox Dashboard using a smartphone or tablet device, via a free app. They can navigate through items, search with Bing and generally use the handheld device as a remote control to make use of the 360 quicker and easier.

It's not something made purely for gamers and, in fact, is clearly a push at getting more users comfortable with navigating the console's front end. While a pad can be off-putting and Kinect can only be employed in limited circumstances, SmartGlass brings a format millions are comfortable with – the touchscreen – and employs it in a user-friendly fashion. Of course, it's heavily linked in with movies and Microsoft's recently launched Xbox Music (formerly Zune), offering up extra snippets of information on the touchscreen and allowing for the playback controls you would expect.

BUT SMARTGLASS DOESN'T totally forget about gamers and actually dedicates some of the more interesting aspects of its functionality to what some may claim Microsoft is moving away from. It's only been used in limited titles so far, but SmartGlass integration in the likes of *Forza Horizon* – in which it offers a live GPS map of the region – is an indication of some reasonably exciting things to come in the future. Expect interactive strategy guides, for example, or maybe functionality akin to a neo-VMU. We've coined that term now; it's ours.

And Microsoft's laboratories the world over haven't been resting on their laurels just because they've brought a functional, if not life-changing, touchscreen technology to the masses. No, the team at Microsoft's computer science lab at the University of Cambridge, along with contributions from the University of Newcastle and the University of Crete, has

DIGITS

■ THE TECH mirrors a user's hand motions incredibly well, with little in the way of lag or error, at least in demonstrations we've seen so far.

Digits is all built from 'off-the-shelf' components, meaning if it is ever made available publicly, the cost shouldn't be too prohibitive, as is often the case with innovative new input devices.

IR DIFFUSE ILLUMINATION
■ Microsoft is making a big deal about how Digits uses existing – and therefore cheap – technology, like IR to illuminate your hand.

IR CAMERA
■ The camera captures the reflected light from the illuminator for the software to convert it until usable 3D data.

IR LASER LINE
■ This projects a beam that's used to measure the distance of fingers in order to calculate their precise angle.

DATA STREAM → EA SPORTS PLEDGES $500,000 OF IN-GAME ADVERTS TO MOVEMBER CHARITY



Inset Digits is currently quite bulky, but Microsoft hopes to be able to reduce the device's size to that of a watch.

revealed to the world Digits, a new step in the world of motion controls.

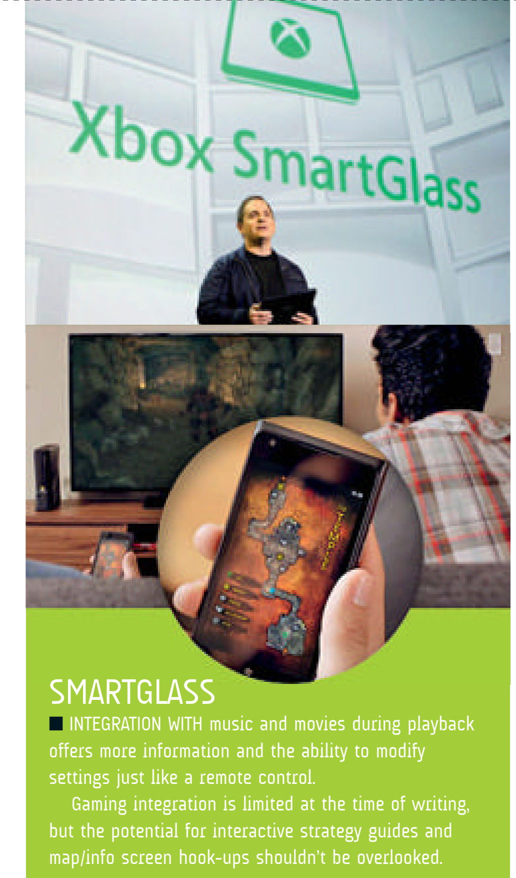
Looking like a modern-day Nintendo Power Glove, Digits is a system built from 'off-the-shelf' components – it's not riddled with new, expensive tech but is instead made from things pretty much anybody could get their hands on. So why is that so special? Well, it all comes down to gesture-based motion control.

YES, THIS IS from the same company that brought us Kinect and saw it swiftly marginalised, and it is in the same industry that has seen motion control boom and bust for Nintendo and simply bust for Sony. But this is a different take on the whole motion integration thing, with Digits concentrating simply on the user's hand.

The tech involves a combination of camera and infrared light, working in unison to create a computer-modelled 'skeleton' of the hand. This can be manipulated in real-time simply by moving, with the action on screen mirroring that of real life. The implications are half-obvious, half-silly ideas, but include things like tapping any surface to use as a keypad, gesture controls for computers and, of course, for gaming – with the example of pointing your hand like a gun to use in first-person shooters being the example most often touted.

Critics have been quick to question aspects of Digits, such as its reliability when being knocked about, how comfortable it is for a user to wear, and if it will be the sort of thing that can offer an immersive or easy-to-use system without tactile feedback. If nothing else, though, it's that step closer to the world of *Minority Report* that we all want and have to mention in any report about motion control tech.

Microsoft may well be ushering focus away from the gaming side of things with the Xbox 360, but it certainly isn't forgetting about the console. These technologies could be the prototypes and early testbed versions of tech we see integrated heavily in the next iteration of the Xbox – gesture-controlled SmartGlass that doesn't need anything like Kinect to work accurately? Maybe. And if a console is built with this tech in mind from day one, the implications for gaming would be a great deal more involved than they are when something is introduced towards the end of a machine's life cycle.



SMARTGLASS

■ INTEGRATION WITH music and movies during playback offers more information and the ability to modify settings just like a remote control.

Gaming integration is limited at the time of writing, but the potential for interactive strategy guides and map/info screen hook-ups shouldn't be overlooked.



EXTRA CREDIT

> GAME

DAVID BRABEN LAUNCHES KICKSTARTER FOR ELITE SEQUEL



■ Another day, another high-profile Kickstarter campaign. The crowdsourcing website appears to attract veteran game designers looking to reignite interest in old-school genres, and the trend continues as David Braben launches the *Elite: Dangerous*. Using procedural technology that Frontier Developments has been cultivating over the years, Braben hopes to recapture the same sense of awe players experienced when booting up the original *Elite* on the BBC Micro back in the Eighties.

> TECH



APPLE LAUNCHES iPAD MINI

■ Finally plugging that irksome gap between the fiddly tininess of the iPhone and the cumbersome doorstop that is the iPad, Apple has released the iPad mini, which, as you might expect, is just a slightly smaller/bigger version of the iPad/iPhone. At a more agreeable price point of around £270, the joys of iOS gaming have never been more affordable.

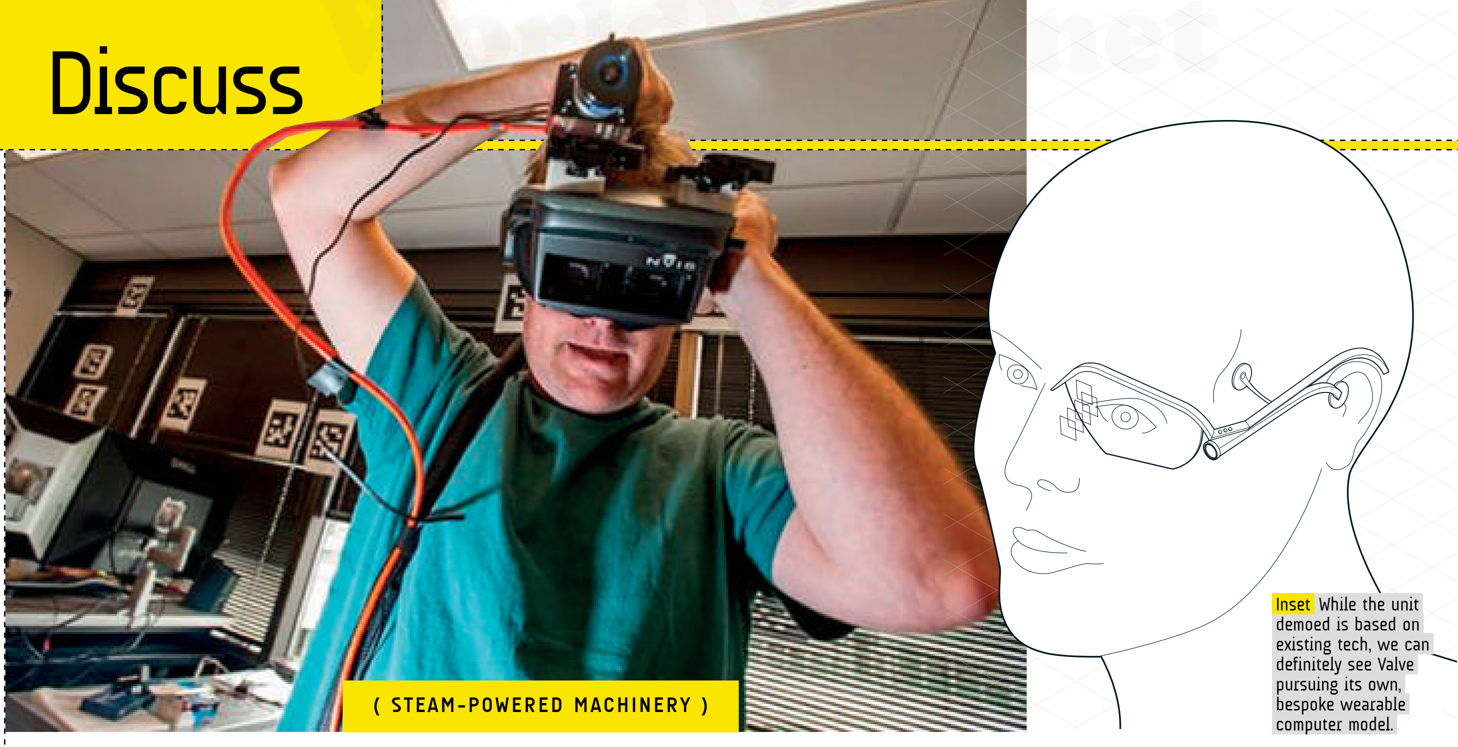
> TECH

MICROSOFT SURFACE DEBUTS

■ Microsoft's first foray into PC manufacturing is a sleek piece of kit. The flagship device for its new Windows 8 operating system marks the company's overdue move into the world of apps and touch interfaces. Using SmartGlass, Surface can also connect to your Xbox 360, which primarily at this point in time is used to interact with the Dashboard.



RESIDENT EVIL 4 MAESTRO SHINJI MIKAMI NETS RE REMAKE LEAD ARTIST TO WORK ON PROJECT ZWEI

Inset While the unit demoed is based on existing tech, we can definitely see Valve pursuing its own, bespoke wearable computer model.

Valve's hardware plans take form

→ Just like its software, Valve will offer a hardware beta in 2013

Wearable computing, lapboard controllers, modular pads – if it was any other studio linked to these ideas, we would baulk. But this is just a handful of potential future products from Valve, and as we all know far too well, Valve is not a studio that makes bad products.

The erstwhile software-only company has been making a push over the last year to get into the world of hardware, though clues as to what we'll actually be seeing are cryptic at best. Talk of 'Valve Glasses' got the gaming community interested earlier this year, but since then there's been little to nothing in the way of concrete news. But progress is being made, new hires are public knowledge, and by some point in 2013 we should be seeing the beta stages of whatever it is the technical gurus at Valve are working on.

One of the biggest, most interesting and definitely cleverest moves on Valve's part has been to hire Jeri Ellsworth, who latterly confirmed she was at the company to work on development of new hardware.

Ellsworth is a self-taught designer of many computer-related gadgets, including the supremely popular C64 Direct-To-TV, which took the slightly miraculous step of miniaturising the entire Commodore 64 architecture down to a single PCB contained within a joystick. This tinkering and hacking mentality suits Valve down to the ground, and Ellsworth is part of a team of like-minded folks working on bringing about something that will "make Steam games more fun to play in your living room".

Ellsworth has also revealed that internal beta-testing on hardware is already under way, so this is well beyond the mere idea-pitching stage. In fact, she revealed that numerous pieces of unnamed hardware are at various stages, from early, rough prototypes to near-shippable units. At some point in 2013 we will have a clearer idea of just what's going on.

Thinking about it, Valve is in one of the best positions any company could possibly be in when it comes to development of new hardware. Not only has the studio bagged some genuine talent in the shape of Ellsworth and other known tinkerers, but it has constantly updated access to current hardware trends of many of the millions who use Steam thanks to the surveying system the platform uses. It is very much a company that knows the shape of today's hardware market and, as such, is more than capable of taking things in a new direction of genuine innovation simply by being Valve.

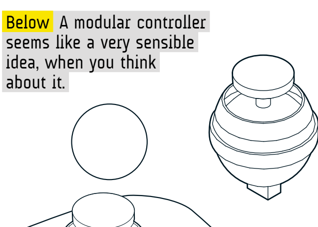
> " Numerous pieces of unnamed hardware are at various stages, from early, rough prototypes to near-shippable units "

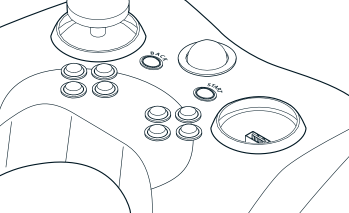
Below Ellsworth was already a celebrity of sorts in the hacking and tinkering community, and she's sure to thrive at Valve.



Image courtesy of Jeri Ellsworth

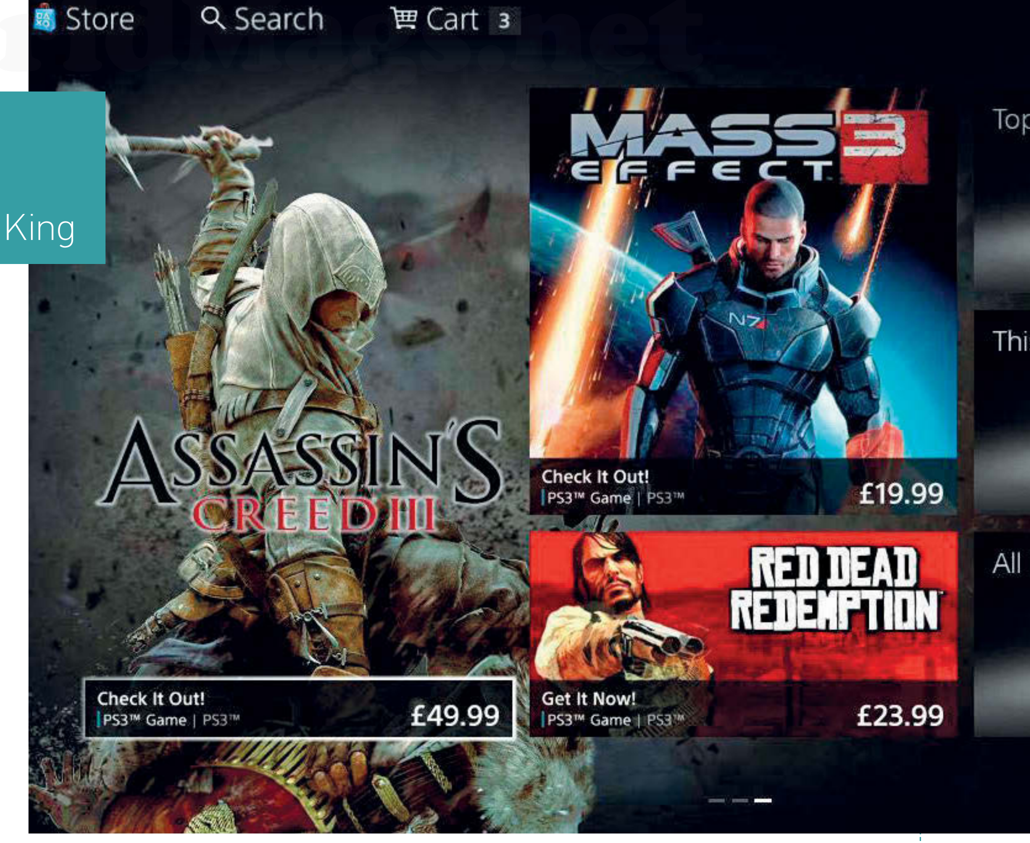
Below A modular controller seems like a very sensible idea, when you think about it.





→ THQ COULD FACE SALE OR BANKRUPTCY, ANALYSTS PREDICT, FOLLOWING POOR FINANCIALS FOR FISCAL 2013

#TRENDING
with NowGamer.com's Ryan King



What happens to our games when we die?



Bruce Willis wants to pass his iTunes collection on to his children when he dies. That might seem like the modern day equivalent of handing down a dusty box of vinyl records or even CDs, but there's a hitch. He can't do it. The problem is that you don't actually buy music from iTunes, not in the traditional sense. You just buy the licence. And so, the idea of passing down an iTunes collection isn't as easy as typing in an email address and hitting 'submit', because transferring the licence is a legal grey area that remains, by and large, unexplored and untested. Unless you like the idea of handing over a hard drive stuffed with music.

The Bruce Willis story has been since debunked, but it touched on a nerve – what happens to our digital media when we die? Gaming is well under way in its moves towards a digital future and, inevitably, as with any major change where the future is largely unknown, there are concerns to go along with it. So far, the frowning has extended to heavy-handed DRM and the death of the second-hand market. Cynicism surrounding DLC hasn't helped ease those concerns.

But surprisingly, the issue of what happens to our digital games when we die is something that hasn't been talked about, presumably because we're yet to reach the point where digital delivery is the de facto distribution method for gaming. However, nothing seems to be in place for passing our games on when we're gone. Deceased Account (**deceasedaccount.com**) shows the methods different companies have for dealing with the departed, and the main thing that stands out is inconsistency. eBay wants a faxed death certificate. Facebook wants a link to a public obituary. Others, such as Reddit, WordPress and Foursquare, don't have a policy. Xbox Live and PSN aren't even mentioned.

The issue of death is a relevant one for social media companies, but it highlights how, in this brave new digital world, even those companies themselves aren't quite sure how to handle the issue. There's an element of sensitivity required, to be balanced against privacy and security concerns, but those social media companies will be setting the example for when similar policies come into play for our digital games. Thus far, the model set is inconsistency or ignorance. It seems that when we die, our games will die with us.

> At the start of the 360's life, the only games you could download were the likes of Root Beer Tapper. Now you can download games like Skyrim

Consider this. When we download games, or any media, the majority do so without reading the fine print and legalese. They're just the annoying screens standing between you and a game of *Saints Row: The Third* from PlayStation Plus, or Frank Ocean's latest album, or streaming *Breaking Bad*. When was the last time you actually read your digital rights? And yet it's becoming more and more important as physical media is shoved to the side in favour of a digital future.

This was thrown into focus when *Under Defeat HD* hit the shelves recently. It's in a retail box like any other, but the weight of it is... well, it's heavy. Opening up the box shows you why. There's a full instruction manual inside that makes up the bulk of the weight, plus a bonus disc containing various extras. Without descending into advertorial territory, the point is that it shows you how physical media is withering and dying, even across the span of a console generation. In the early days of the Xbox 360, physical games came with weighty instruction manuals and the only games you could download were *Root Beer Tapper* and *Boom Boom Rocket*. Now instruction manuals are barely token gestures and you can download games like *Skyrim*.

That's progress, but it's progress with consequence. After all, why hold on to physical media? Digital games can't be passed down but they'll be re-released with a shiny HD lick of paint and Achievements, leaderboards, Trophies and maybe even DLC. With the number of older games re-emerging with an HD makeover, is anyone even particularly concerned about backwards compatibility for the PlayStation 4 and whatever the next Xbox ends up being called? In the absence of that feature, the physical media we're clinging to will be useless without the original consoles, which will become harder to find, trickier to repair, more expensive in price as they stop being manufactured and existing hardware wears out.

The sad truth is that all of this is unlikely to matter. We're the generation of gamers bridging the gap between physical and digital. There are those who will be picking up a pad for the very first time. They will grow up knowing only a world where games are downloaded or streamed, where instruction manuals are rendered obsolete by lengthy tutorials and passing games on to future generations is an alien concept. We'll be the ones left behind with a box of Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 titles, gathering dust long after we've gone.

Best make the most of them while we're here.

Ryan King is editor of NowGamer.com



GTA V: Is the timing right?

→ Rockstar details its upcoming crime opus

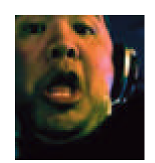
Rockstar can afford to play coy with *GTA* fans, such is the rabid reaction to even the smallest piece of enigmatic art or nondescript screenshot. Unfortunately, the timing of deadlines means that **games™** has headed to the printers a couple of days before Rockstar commences its promised information drop on *Grand Theft Auto V*, primed to lift the lid on the protagonists, story and how each will interact in the game's Los Angeles proxy, Los Santos.

We do have a few clues as to what to expect, not least with concept art featuring blonde, bikini-clad girls; tough-as-nails virtual Angelinos; and other felonious types painted in *GTA*'s inimitable style. With a confirmed release window of spring 2013, it suggests Rockstar's preferred April-May period as the date the game will ship. That's starting to become a very popular time of year, but *GTA V* is sure to hold up.

GAME DEV STORY

with Q-Games' James Mielke

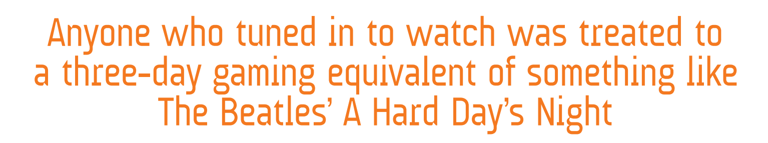
Tokyo Game Show: From the outside looking in



Although I have spent a good portion of the last decade attending the Tokyo Game Show, both as an editor and a game developer, this year in particular was something slightly different altogether. Myself and two of my cohorts – Dylan Cuthbert, president of Q-Games, and John Davis, PR dude at Q-Games, formerly of Grasshopper Manufacture – attended TGS as spectators, rather than participants. Since the games we are working on wouldn't be ready in time for TGS, we decided early on to simply head up to Tokyo for a few days and document our shenanigans, and anyone interested could watch our adventures on Ustream.

It was no easy task, as we spent over a month hammering out the details at Q headquarters. The first question was what would we show people, and how? We considered everything from blogs, to photo blogs, or simple updates on our Facebook page. Eventually we decided that we would 'film' the entire trip – or at least the more interesting parts of it – and livestream the parties, the meet-ups, the nerdy hotspots of gaming effluvia, and last but not least, the show itself. We would achieve this by buying three new iPod touches and hiring pocket Wi-Fi devices, which we would carry with us everywhere we went. We augmented our staying power by buying external iPod rechargers, which doubled our default battery life.

The benefit to all of this was that our viewers would be able to tune in and watch us walking around Tokyo, and we did our best to live it up on camera, documenting everything from the point of departure, filming the tedious details of hiring a cab to Kyoto Station so we could catch the Shinkansen bullet train up to Tokyo, everything in between, and the eventual trip home. One problem we had to solve, however, was that in order to film actual games being played at TGS, we would have to somehow disguise our iPods as something else. Ironically, we found a solution by disguising the iPods as actual cameras. During a trip to local electronics megaplex Yodobashi Camera, we stumbled upon iPod cases that looked like old-school Pentax camera bodies, which we could hang around our necks on camera straps, which appeared perfectly normal. As long as we didn't pick them up and point them at anything – TGS booths are notoriously famous for not allowing close-up photos of any game kiosks – we were fine. So, all we had to do was turn on our iPods and begin our broadcast before we entered the gaming hall and record away to our hearts' content.



Anyone who tuned in to watch was treated to a three-day gaming equivalent of something like The Beatles' A Hard Day's Night

As a result, anyone who tuned in to watch was treated to a three-day gaming equivalent of something like The Beatles' *A Hard Day's Night*: three lads on the run, acting up in Tokyo and living to tell about it. On the Tuesday before the show began, we started our broadcast during our wait for the Shinkansen, capturing our conversation up until our trip began and we started to lose our connection since the train was moving so fast. Eagle-eyed viewers would later catch us checking in at our hotel in Shinagawa, where we met up with *Ico* creator Fumito Ueda and *Gravity Rush* producer Keiichiro Toyama. Later that evening, we set our cameras up at the industry party that I regularly DJ at and broadcast my rather eclectic set live.

The next day, after broadcasting a bit of running about town, as we raced off to various meetings, we eventually brought the lesser-known gaming mecca of Nakano Broadway – home of otaku haven Mandarake and vintage gaming superstore Galaxy, among others – giving our viewers a tour of places in Tokyo most people only dream of seeing. The final day, Thursday, we took the trip out to Makuhari Messe where TGS is held, picked up our industry badges, and took our watchers on a live walkthrough of the show floor, stopping by to play things like *Earth Defense Force 3*, *Phantasy Star Online 2*, *Malicious*, and other odds and ends. One of the areas we made sure to investigate was the merchandise zone, where publishers set up booths filled with nerdish delights, like Square Enix action figures and $300 *Monster Hunter* jackets from Capcom.

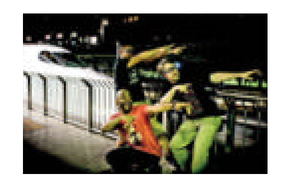
By the end of the first day, we had seen everything that needed to be seen or shown, and trundled off back the way we came, with tired feet and heavy bags. There is no moral to this story beyond the fact that we, as developers, let our hair down for a few days and played the part of 'agent provocateurs' in the name of bringing you closer to Tokyo Game Show than ever before. Was the effort worth it? We like to think it was.

James Mielke is a producer at Q-Games



Dead or alive?

■ It's a well-worn question whether or not TGS has lost its lustre. In my opinion, the quality is dependent on whether or not the games are up to snuff. This year I'd say they were actually quite solid, with newcomers like Capcom's *EX Troopers* looking very tasty, and Sega's *PSO2* eagerly awaited by yours truly. The problem, if there was one, was that the social gaming behemoths are soaking up a lot of the space, and no one goes to TGS for free-to-play card games on Android. The thing that would really 'save' TGS is if Nintendo would participate, but I don't see that happening any time soon.



Mike Singleton remembered

→ Mike Singleton, the British programmer best known for creating Lords Of Midnight, died on 10 October, aged 61, after a long battle with cancer. Singleton's career blossomed in the home computer heyday with the Midwinter trilogy, but he also managed to transition into the modern era, working on several LucasArts projects, among other well-loved games. As well as a 30-year career in games, Singleton was also a novelist and English teacher and will be missed by many. Here's what the games™ community had to say about his life's work…

"*Lords Of Midnight* represented a groundbreaking moment in home computing by presenting adventure of high scale, supported by great graphics. I remember playing it loads on the Spectrum when it came out, and actually 'completing' it a few years later on C64 by getting my guy to the tower and meeting one of the victory conditions. The whole production was epic for the time."
Shinymcshine, games™ forum

"I worked with Mike on *G-Surfers* and will always remember his inventive approach to track editing – still unmatched! RIP Mike."
Alasdair Evans, Twitter

"A programmer who really did create worlds for us to play in. Mike also helped on the first truly great *Star Trek* game, Firebird's *The Rebel Universe*, with its unique windowing system. A real shame we will never see *Eye Of The Moon*, the third part of the *Midnight* trilogy."
Andrew Fisher, Facebook

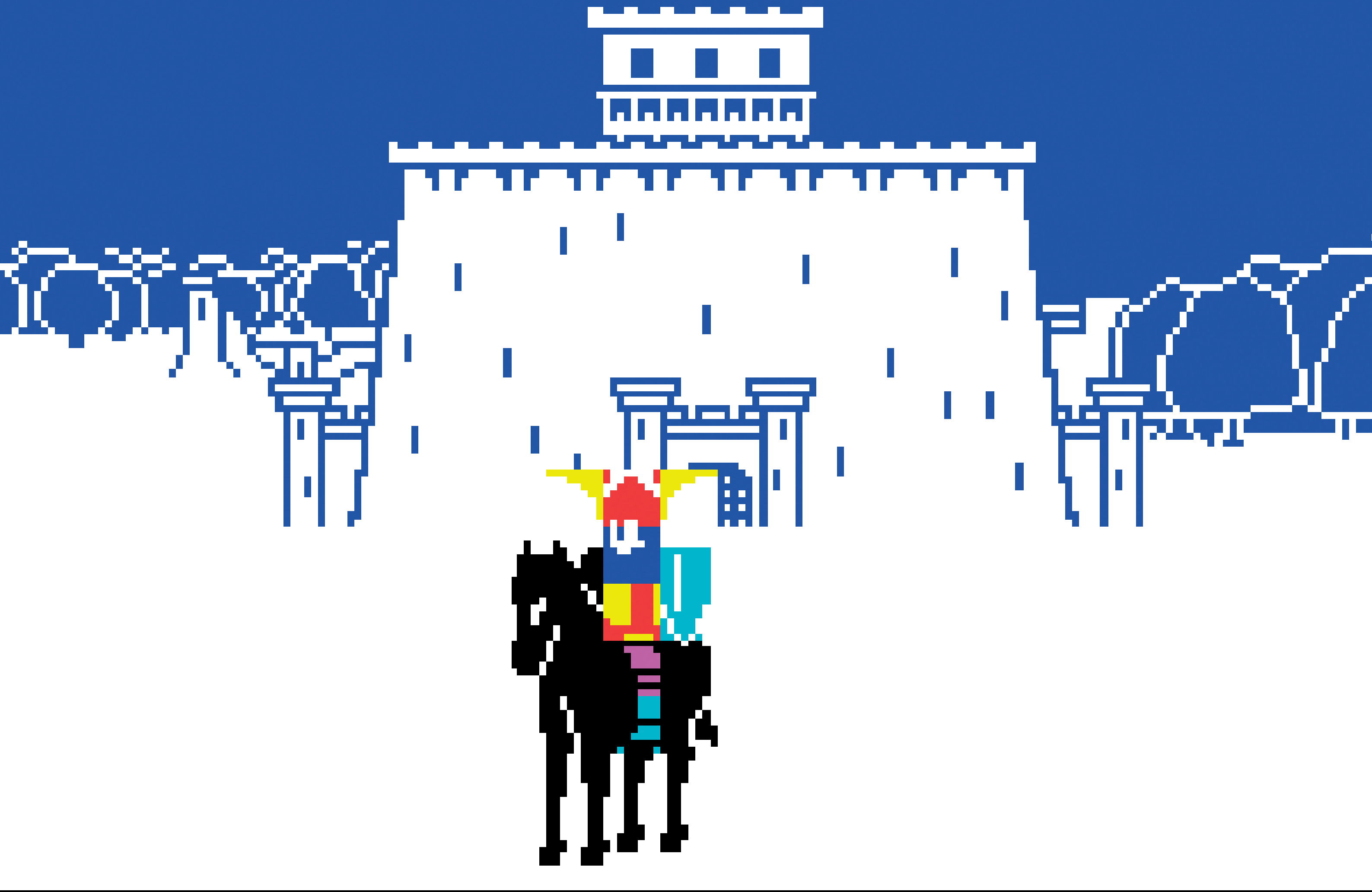
"Anyone remember *Star Trek: The Rebel Universe* on the C64? Good game but you need to draw a big map."
Garry Irwin, Twitter

"I loved both of the *Lords Of Midnight* games. I remember the keyboard overlay you got with the game as there were too many commands. *Throne Of Fire* was also brilliant; three players on the humble Spectrum was unheard of then. It was both simple but had a lot of depth, which was hard to do with the limited technology, but Mike was an awesome games programmer. RIP Mike."
Mr Marvellous, games™ forum

"*Midwinter* was an absolute classic. RIP Mike."
Shaun French, Twitter

"What a loss. Best coder of the early 8-bit era."
Danny Major, Twitter

"Mike Singleton was a true innovator. *Lords Of Midnight* was an unbelievably complex game for 1984. And all crammed into 48K too! Stunning."
Glyn Davies, Twitter



BEST OF

The stiff upper lip. The steely glint in the eye. The stoutness of heart.

Each of these things made Britain great in the field of combat; but all the grit, pluck and spunk in the world is nothing without the hardware to match.

Now World of Tanks brings you the finest armoured vehicles this country has ever produced – including the Churchill, Cromwell, Crusader, Black Prince, Centurion and Comet – all yours to command in free to play, team-based, global online tank battles.







GAMESPOT UK **8/10** "A great, accessible shooter"

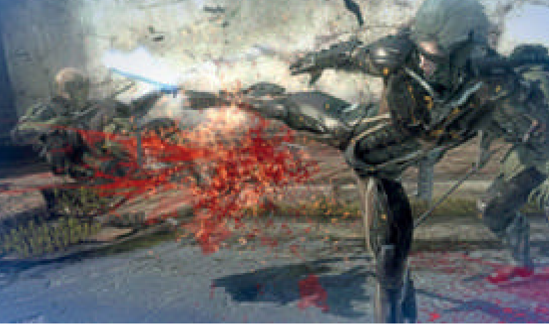


80/100 "If you like RPGs, strategy or even action games, you'll love this"

When in Blade mode, time slows down and the third-person camera zooms in to get a better view of the butchery. You can be surprisingly precise with your slashes, and the game even keeps count of the number of chunks you chop an enemy into.

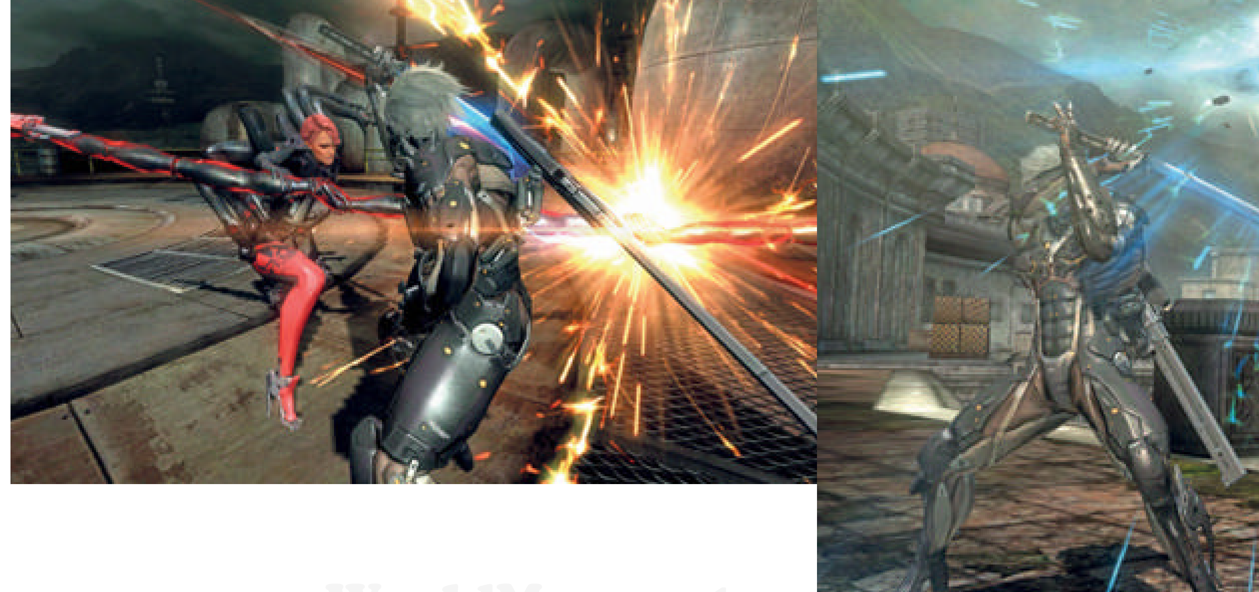
STEALTHILY DOES IT

METAL GEAR RISING hasn't totally done away with the franchise's penchant for Tactical Espionage Action, and it's still possible to adopt a less aggressive style if you choose. Enemies can be attacked unawares, or outflanked and dispatched using a combination of Raiden's augmented viewing mode and swift, ninja-like movements. It's a welcome nod to the original concept of *Metal Gear*, but Platinum needs to work on the enemy AI. At one point during our preview, we were stood right alongside a soldier and he failed to react to our presence. A case of shocking peripheral vision from an apparently state-of-the-art cyborg mercenary if ever we saw one, and something that needs rectifying if immersion is to be maintained.





Above: Raiden's transformation from whiny wimp to kick-ass cyborg is complete in *Rising*; he's an impressive walking arsenal, capable of turning most enemies into mincemeat in seconds. He's not invincible, though – enemies will often crowd him out or attack from afar. Right: Faces from past *Metal Gear* titles will reappear, along with some new personalities who will no doubt go on to become fan favourites.



Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance

CONCEPT ■ A mixture of espionage and in-your-face carnage, *Metal Gear Rising* is what happens when you allow Platinum Games loose on one of Konami's most beloved franchises.

Raiden's blood-soaked return cuts like a hot knife through butter

Raiden has come a long way since his divisive debut in 2001's *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons Of Liberty*. Following his cybernetic rehabilitation in the fourth *Metal Gear Solid*, he's now ready to become a leading man once again and, somewhat fittingly, he's starring in one of the most controversial entries in Hideo Kojima's million-selling lineage.

Rising has had its work cut out – no pun intended – almost from the time it was announced. The sidelining of the series' trademark stealth gameplay was seen by many fans as a slap in the face, as was the involvement of an external developer in the shape of Platinum Games. The ludicrous 'Revengeance' subtitle was merely the icing on the cake – but, as Konami has discovered, the tide of negativity is slowly turning as the 2013 release date creeps ever closer.

Indeed, hands-on time with *Rising* does have an undeniable effect of changing your perception. The unique swordplay really is empowering; at any point you can hold down the L1 button to enter Blade mode, which triggers bullet time-style slowdown and allows you to perform incredibly precise amateur dissection on your hapless foes, dicing up the surrounding scenery as well. Using the right stick, you can execute deadly directional slashes with surprising accuracy – something that is keenly illustrated by the tutorial, which tasks you with solving a hostage situation by neatly slicing off the perpetrator's cranium without harming the innocent victim.

Blade mode is likely to become the game's signature feature and lends the impression of real power during play. Like all good game mechanics, it makes you feel like a kid with a brand new toy, and finding ways to utilise this new-found power is half of the entertainment. However, despite Raiden's ability to cut through practically any object, it's not a free ticket to success; enemies will do their best to contain the carnage by shutting you down with melee attacks or picking you off with ranged weapons before you have a chance to unsheathe that blade.

/// This delicate sense of balance permeates the entire experience. When faced with an open area and several unsuspecting enemies, do you opt to cut a swath through them or do you instead try to methodically deal with the threats one by one? Despite his enhanced physiology, Raiden is far from invincible – as we discovered several times during our playtest, usually when going head-to-head with a surprisingly agile Gekko mech – and this demands a level of tactical thinking that hasn't necessarily been a hallmark of Platinum's output.

Elsewhere though, *Rising* is typical Platinum, mixing together the brutal melee attacks of *Bayonetta* with the large arenas and ranged combat of *Vanquish*. Raiden has become the cybernetic equivalent of a Swiss Army knife, and watching his robotic body subtly morph and transform to reveal deadly blades and other means of mutilation is strangely hypnotic. You'll need to make good use of these attack options, too, as the variety of opponents is vast. One moment Raiden is slicing up hapless cyborg soldiers and extracting energy from their disembowelled corpses; the next he's tackling an alarmingly agile robot wolf with a chainsaw attached to its back.

Metal Gear purists will be pleased to note that stealth still plays a role, and the storyline, overseen by Kojima Productions, is typically engaging stuff. There are minor issues to report, however: the rather inconsistent parry system needs work, as do the annoying camera problems when dropping in and out of Blade mode. The latter complaint can prove frustrating when you're backed into a corner and surrounded by assailants, but mastery of the controls does seem to mitigate the problem.

There's still time for Platinum to remedy such niggles before Raiden steps out next year. One thing is certain: while this *Metal Gear* may divide fans, it's unlikely to prove unsatisfactory for lovers of Platinum's unique brand of interactive madness.

> "As soon as you chop something and realise that you can reduce pretty much anything to mince, you're grabbed"
> BRIAN AYERS KONAMI UK

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Konami
Developer: Platinum Games
Release: 21 February 2013
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Formed in 2006 by legendary Capcom developers Shinji Mikami, Atsushi Inaba and Hideki Kamiya, Platinum Games is arguably one of Japan's most exciting studios. Although Mikami has since left, it continues to create some of modern gaming's most appealing titles.

Developer History

Anarchy Reigns **2012 [Multi]**
Vanquish **2010 [Multi]**
Bayonetta **2010 [Multi]**

High Point

Channeling the cool of *Devil May Cry* and incorporating a truly original game world, *Bayonetta* is a 'stylish action' title that demands to be played.





■ Above: A parry mechanic has been included, but using it effectively requires a lot of practice. Expect more than a little frustration along the way. Left: Dealing with ranged threats when you lack projectile weaponry for most of the game is one of *Rising*'s most tricky challenges.



WELCOME TO THE PARTY, PAL

WHILE THE FOUR main characters from the original *Dead Island* return here, another character has been added to the mix that enables players to take on the role of the survivor from a fresh pair of eyes. Techland hasn't released many details about this new protagonist – least of all how she becomes part of the group – but it'd be nice if there were someone actually interesting to follow around this time. And if that doesn't sound like your cup of tea, you're welcome to import your hero from the previous game.

Inset: The new water-based location certainly has a more unsettling ambience than the glorious sunshine of the original game. Hopefully Techland has played up the horror element this time, as it was mostly absent first time around.



Inset: *Riptide*'s debut trailer makes for depressing viewing. Clearly not a faithful representation of the final game, the production values at least make what is sure to be a tradition among *Dead Island* games a welcome one.

Dead Island: Riptide

CONCEPT ■ Picking up after the events of the first game, *Riptide* has the four survivors marooned on an island, fending off the undead hordes.

Back to the island

We'd be surprised if the debut teaser for *Dead Island: Riptide* fooled anyone. After all, the emotional sucker punch and somewhat sombre visuals that garnered international attention and notable accolades in the original game's trailer belied the thumping mediocrity of the finished product.

Choosing to once again employ an unsettling marketing angle, *Riptide*'s less spectacular promo shares the final moments of a doomed couple, entangled in a loving embrace as they take their own lives rather than succumb to the torture of the zombies waiting to break into their yacht. This will, of course, be in no way representative of the gameplay. Instead, we can expect another competent FPS with a few interesting role-playing elements sprinkled on top.

But that's not to say there's nothing to look forward to with the impending sequel. As the title suggests, water plays an integral part here and offers a fresh crop of challenges as the returning characters battle to survive another zombie outbreak on a neighbouring island.

Picking up straight after the events of the original, the four survivors have crash-landed on the island of Palanai in the Banoi archipelago. Barely distinguishing itself from its predecessor's setting, the fringes of this tropical nightmare fail to impress – all pearly white shorelines and pristine blue skies – but heading inland reveals a vastly different terrain. Much of the island has been ravaged by storms, with deep ravines and swamps transforming vast swaths of the jungle into an impassable death trap. This unpredictable climate raises new dangers, not least the rolling storms – one aspect of a new dynamic weather system – that further savage the landscape and add another element that players must battle against to survive.

Boats replace the cumbersome land-based vehicles of the original – although these segments may return in some form – as the main means of transport as you ferry your group to inaccessible destinations, and this simple activity isn't without its own dangers. Those pesky undead flesh-eaters will be lurking among the various lagoons, occasionally rising from the depths to grab a quick bite of your human companions.

/// One of the more common complaints directed at *Dead Island* was that there was always a risk of a more dangerous scenario waiting just around the corner, so stockpiling the extremely fragile armaments always felt like a necessity. Addressing this, Techland has made the most exigent encounters plainly obvious this time around, which means when your boat is being overrun by underwater zombies, it's probably a good time not to be stingy with how many shotgun shells you unload. Such obvious improvements are of course welcome additions, this being one of several that seems more impressive given the haste of the short development period. Take the interesting new fortifications, which players can build in Horde-style defensive missions: it's another touch made to the template, albeit a derivative one, that alleviates much of the rigmarole of the original's go-there-shoot-that-move-on.

> "The next battle between life and death will be waged in Dead Island: Riptide"
>
> PRESS RELEASE DEEP SILVER

But will any of these little improvements make any difference? Arriving so soon after the original has led many to suspect *Riptide* is nothing more than inflated DLC content, and many of the iterative enhancements hardly disprove that. The developer has claimed that the campaign will last around 20-30 hours, which is a more encouraging sign of an investment in making *Riptide* a true sequel, rather than a cynical pit-stop.

So regardless of the weepy cinematic farewell of its debut trailer, we have a much stronger idea of what to expect from the sequel: another mediocre FPS with role-playing game elements sprinkled on top. Some visible improvements have been made, so there's every chance it could be more than that, but for now let's put aside all of the marketing bluster and just appreciate the game for what it is.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Origin: Poland
Publisher: Deep Silver
Developer: Techland
Release: 2013
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

Initially founded in 1991 as a software distributor, Techland entered the realm of internal development in 2000 with *Crime Cities*. Recognised for its patchy *Call Of Juarez* franchise, the company garnered international recognition with *Dead Island* in 2011. Well, its trailer at least.

Developer History

Dead Island **2011 [Multi]**

Nail'd **2010 [Multi]**

Call Of Juarez **2006 [Multi]**

Crime Cities **2000 [PC]**

High Point

Most of the studio's output has been distinctly average, so it's fair to say that *Dead Island* is its most accomplished and ambitious work.



Inset: New protagonists Alpha and Bravo have replaced Salem and Rios. It's one measure of how Visceral has wiped the slate clean on the third entry in the franchise.

Inset: Overkill mode segues into a slow-motion massacre, as players can dismember enemies until nothing remains but a fine red paste.

Army Of Two: The Devil's Cartel

CONCEPT ■ Visceral Games seizes the reins of the *Army Of Two* franchise, dropping the immaturity in favour of high-impact thrills.

Lead designer Julien Lamoureux discusses how Visceral Games is severing the 'dudebro' mentality

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Origin: Canada
Publisher: EA
Developer: Visceral Games
Release: March 2013
Players: 1-2

Developer Profile

Split into three studios in three different companies, Visceral Games rose to prominence after the suspenseful *Dead Space* met critical and commercial success in 2008. Before then the studio prominently worked on some decent licensed titles, including *The Simpsons Game*, *The Godfather* and *The Lord Of The Rings: The Return Of The King*.

Developer History

Dead Space 2
2011 [Multi]
Dante's Inferno
2010 [Multi]
The Godfather: The Game
2006 [Multi]
007: Agent Under Fire
2001 [PS2]

High Point

A mix of stirring tension and high-octane action, *Dead Space 2* is one of the most intense action games of the last decade.

Consistency is a rare commodity in the games industry. Take your pick from any of the most illustrious studios working today and you'll doubtless find one or two misfires among its more notable hits. It comes as no surprise, then, that Visceral Games has taken over EA's co-operative *Army Of Two* franchise. Proven to be one of the publisher's most dependable internal teams, time after time Visceral has delivered quality action titles driven by existing licences or imaginative new IPs. Speaking to lead designer Julien Lamoureux, **gamesTM** asks what Visceral is bringing to *Army Of Two: The Devil's Cartel*.

The *Army Of Two* franchise has consistently divided opinion between critics and consumers. Has that changed the way you've approached *The Devil's Cartel*?
One of the two key takeaways for us was definitely the tone. Some people loved it; other people thought it was too cheesy, so that is something we worked on. Not to say that we don't have humour any more, but we're trying to be a bit more sophisticated about it. The Mexican drug cartel is a serious subject, so we're trying to approach the humour in a more sophisticated way. Instead of the heroes air-guitaring and high-fiving in the middle of combat, what you'll get is more sarcastic remarks in the middle of encounters. The other thing was to refocus ourselves on what we really are at the end of the day: a co-op game. That's our bread and butter. [That meant] getting rid of some of the distractions like competitive multiplayer that took away a lot of resources and maybe was not on par with other [multiplayer] games out there. For us, because we're creating a game with Frostbite 2, rebuilding everything from the ground up, it was kind of a no-brainer to double down on the co-op campaign experience.

> "The Mexican drug cartel is a serious subject, so we're trying to approach the humour in a more sophisticated way"
> JULIEN LAMOUREUX VISCERAL GAMES

Is it difficult to create something more mature?

First it was going back to things like the fratboy moves, like fist-bumping, air-guitaring and talking about having sex. These clearly are crossing the line in acting and voiceover. These are the things we decided to move, opting for more sophisticated things. A bit more depth to the character, more sarcasm versus first-degree jokes. But then once you start playing, it gets over the top when you go into Overkill.

It seems like you're going for a more violent approach, especially with the Overkill mode.

We wanted players to be working in a co-operative way to gain the Overkill, so we also wanted to make sure once they got it that it was very satisfying and really maximising the impact of Frostbite 2 in terms of the destruction. It was a natural progression to go to dismemberment – it was really swish. And knowing that we're Visceral Games – *Dead Space* has been known for cool dismemberments – we thought it was worth investing in.

How do you ensure that players work together? Have you scripted sequences that enforce teamwork?

What we have done first is obviously the Overkill. The entire idea behind it is that the more you co-operate by flanking, tag-teaming and performing co-op combos in fast succession, you'll get Overkill faster. If you want to be a lone wolf and get Overkill then you can do that, but it'll take more time. Also, one important thing about that is the more you play co-op, the more you get Overkill, but you also get more money, which helps you rank up quicker. So you will want to co-operate with your friend. On top of that, we also have segments that split the players so they have to help each other out.

Do you see *The Devil's Cartel* being in direct competition with the likes of *Call Of Duty* and *Halo*?

We're all doing shooters; we're all trying to make the best game possible. We feel like we're different in the sense that we're a military shooter, so people who are not too much into sci-fi and other crazy things can relate to it. But at the same time we're not too serious in the sense that this rifle here has this rate of fire and this damage. We're taking ourselves a bit less seriously. We're set in the Mexican drug war, which is very different, and Mexico is a cool country because there are a lot of different environments, which is something we're playing on. We're not always in a torn-down city; we're going to visit a lot of various locations. At the end of the day, we're also co-op, so if you start taking all of the different angles we're doing differently then we feel that the entire package is significant enough to be a serious player on the market.



Inset: Teamwork is enforced during certain scenarios, including some of the game's most bombastic QTE sequences.

A SMOOTH TRANSITION

KEY TO the success of co-op is continuing progression through single-player, local and online multiplayer. "[We're] making sure that players can enjoy it single-player with an AI, split-screen and online," says lead designer Julien Lamoureux. "Also, make a persistent progression, so say you're playing split-screen with a friend and then they go, you can continue your campaign in single-player with the same progression and then you can jump online. The character progression is persistent so that you can always enjoy yourself and the various aspects. We really wanted to focus on what we're good at and maximise and capitalise on it."





Left: The fantasy world is tied directly to Oliver's reality, meaning interactions in one can have direct effects on the other. Above: Some of the voice acting on the English dub is patchy, but Welsh fairy Drippy is a wonderful constant.

OVERLY FAMILIAR

OUTFITTING YOUR team with a solid selection of critters isn't easy. And once you've battled your way to a decent collection, there are factors aplenty to consider. Each party member has an affinity for certain species, which must be juggled with the need for a balanced team that covers the four alignments. On top of that, there are costs to weigh up, both in the short term with each type taking different kinds of equipment, and the long term – magical monsters will put a strain on your shared MP reserves. Be careful when you evolve them, too. While the stat gain is handy, resetting your star warrior to level one just before a boss battle can be catastrophic.



Above: The parallel realities – *Ni No Kuni* translates as 'Second Country' – represent the mundane and the fantastical. Right: The score is performed by the Tokyo Philharmonic Orchestra. It's a gorgeous work, penned by Joe Hisaishi, who is to Studio Ghibli's Hayao Miyazaki what John Williams is to Steven Spielberg.







Left: The world is simply stunning. It's a joy to explore, too – there's hidden loot all over the place and monsters react to your actions and strength, charging you down or fleeing accordingly.



Ni No Kuni: Wrath Of The White Witch

CONCEPT A crossover project between RPG expert Level-5 and anime superpower Studio Ghibli.

A proper tidy JRPG

From 16-bit sprite-based games to early cel-shading experiments and even back as far as the colour clash messes of the 8-bit era, countless games have been described – or, in more audacious instances, have described themselves – as looking like cartoons. But the simple truth is that with a mere handful of exceptions, they just didn't. Sure, they may have been as close as the technology of the time would allow, or had an art style that captured and reflected simpler forms of animation. But when even games like *Wacky Races* and any number of Nicktoons titles are shown up to be interactive impostors by jagged edges or close-but-no-cigar approximations of familiar faces, it should have been clear that any direct comparison between the two media would be pure hyperbole.

And even now, in the twilight of the most powerful console generation so far, the transition between in-game visuals and animated cut-scenes is still not seamless. But don't take that as a sign of failure on Level-5's part – *Ni No Kuni* comes as close as the medium has ever seen, aided by the production values and thematic strengths of the works of Studio Ghibli. Even though separating animation from gameplay is far from the world's hardest spot-the-difference, the artistry and detail in the 3D craftsmanship is right up there on a par with what the animation house puts out – the playable element might not be a Studio Ghibli animation, but it cosplays one gloriously. The full orchestral score adds yet more credibility, and even in its most pedestrian moments, *Ni No Kuni* is an utterly gorgeous production.

/// The imagination present in the game's less than conventional setup extends well into other aspects of its design, too. With Oliver whisked away to become an apprentice magician in a whole new world, spells play a far more important role than simply setting enemies on fire and keeping HP up between battles. Accessible through a tap of the square button outside of combat, your full complement of incantations can be attempted and/or employed at any time. Many of these are utility spells – for opening locks or conversing with the dead, for instance – but it's refreshing to see practical applications for powers that other games would restrict to battle use only. While you'll often get a simple point-and-click-style 'that doesn't work' as a result of experimentation, it's always rewarding to have an ingenious brainwave or cunning piece of casting pay off.

Battles, however, stand out only on account of their simplicity. Party members take command of up to three Familiars, though only one of these can be active at once. There's a simple paper-scissors-stone backbone to the Familiar system, with a few secondary systems working alongside it to ensure greater variety among the cast of monsters. *Pokémon* comparisons are all but unavoidable here – beat enemies to within an inch of their lives, kidnap them, name them, level them up, teach them new moves, even evolve them. It lacks much of the flexibility and nuance of the Game Freak games, but as part of a larger universe, that's to be expected. And while simple, it works well. Fights are slick and offer a surprising level of strategic depth, especially evident in the powerful bosses, who can often be toppled with either an hour or so of grinding or a few perfect pieces of planning and execution.

If there's any criticism for *Ni No Kuni*, it's the matter of exactly who it is aimed at. While far better explained and more channelled than some of Level-5's less immediate titles, it's still questionable whether or not the gameplay will sail over the heads of those who merely turned up on the promise of a playable cartoon. It is, after all, a fully featured JRPG, and appealing as the prospect of hands-on Ghibli may be, it's unlikely that even this extraordinary level of polish will be enough to win over those without a taste for stat screens and command-based gameplay.

> "Ni No Kuni might look like a typical JRPG, but we challenged ourselves to provide something new"
> AKIHIRO HINO LEVEL-5

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PlayStation 3
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Namco Bandai
Developer: Level-5
Release: 25 January
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Who would have thought that the team behind *Dark Cloud* and cancelled Xbox MMO *True Fantasy Live Online* would go on to become one of gaming's preeminent creative forces? At just 15 years old, the team already heads up series like *Professor Layton* and *Dragon Quest*, now becoming the first and only developer to unite with Studio Ghibli. Ya done good, Level-5…

Developer History

White Knight Chronicles II **2011 [PS3]**

Professor Layton And The Curious Village **2008 [DS]**

Jeanne D'Arc **2006 [PSP]**

Dark Chronicle **2003 [PS2]**

High Point

DS exclusive *Dragon Quest IX* would be our pick, although the studio has a handful of games that could easily be argued into the top slot.



1 IN A clear homage to the opening of the original, the trailer begins with Booker DeWitt sailing towards a lighthouse in the distance. Some have suggested that *Infinite* may foreshadow the original game, but we're hoping that Levine and his team won't pursue such obvious theatrics.

BioShock Infinite

CONCEPT ■ The *BioShock* franchise leaves the murky depths of Rapture behind for the open-world delights of floating sky city Columbia.

Trouble in paradise

It's hard not to take notice when a large volume of key personnel announce their departure from one of the industry's most prestigious studios during crunch time on what might be its biggest game yet. It's even harder not to ask questions. Irrational Games recently lost its combat designer, AI lead and art director in an internal shake-up that included the hiring of former *Gears Of War* director of production Rod Fergusson. And it's no secret that *BioShock Infinite* has undergone a turbulent development, with multiple delays, rumours of scrapped multiplayer modes and the conspicuous absence of hands-on access for press as the game creeps closer to its planned February shipping date. But if any of these troublesome developments have raised questions over the quality of the finished product, *BioShock Infinite*'s latest gameplay trailer is an apt rebuttal for Irrational. Focusing on the production values rather than the complex socio-political and mystical undertones of the game's narrative, suffice to say it's a far-reaching demonstration of the game's intense spectacle. Consider us back on board.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Origin: US
Publisher: 2K Games
Developer: Irrational Games
Release: 26 February
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Formed by Looking Glass Studios employees in the late Nineties, Irrational Games proved its pedigree a few short years later with cyberpunk shooter *System Shock 2*. Upon being acquired by Take-Two Interactive in 2006, the studio was renamed 2K Boston until it regained its original moniker after the surprise success of the original *BioShock*.

Developer History

BioShock **2007 [Multi]**

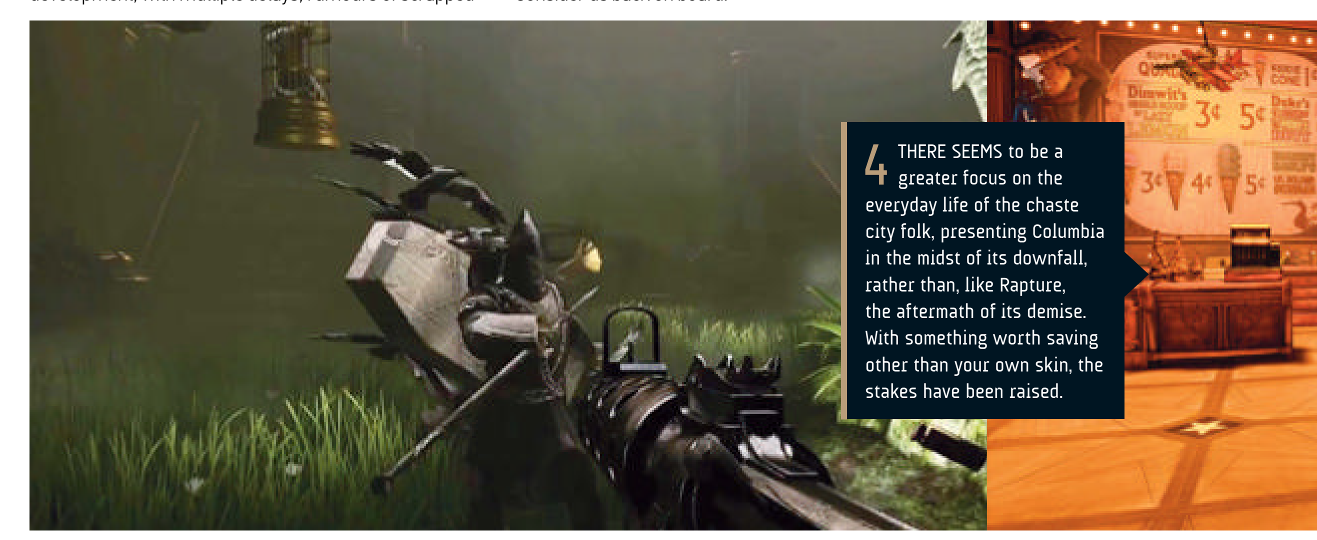
SWAT 4 **2005 [PC]**

Tribes: Vengeance **2004 [PC]**

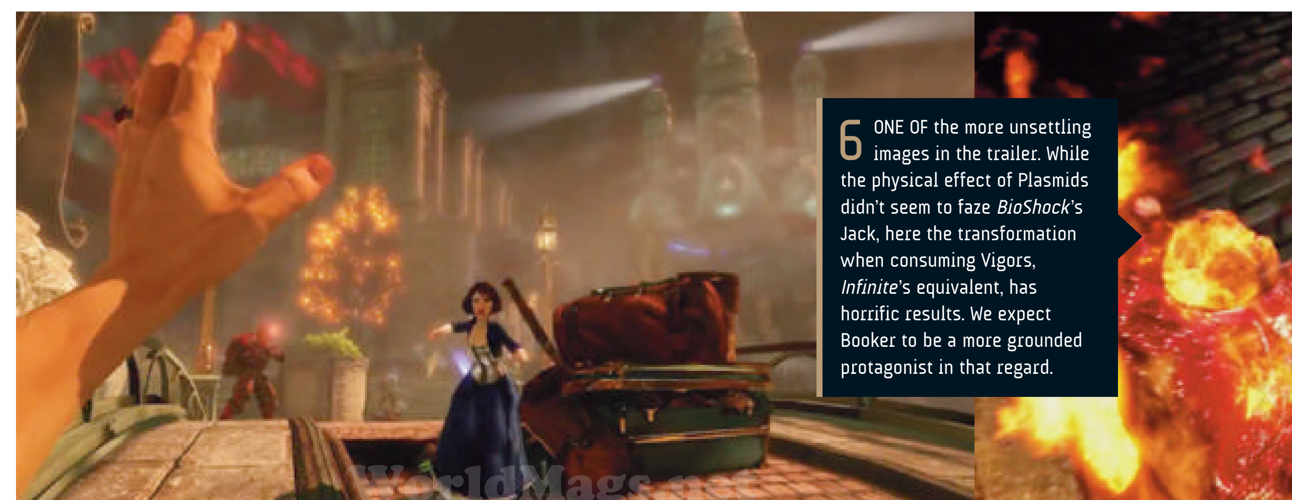
System Shock 2 **1999 [PC]**

High Point

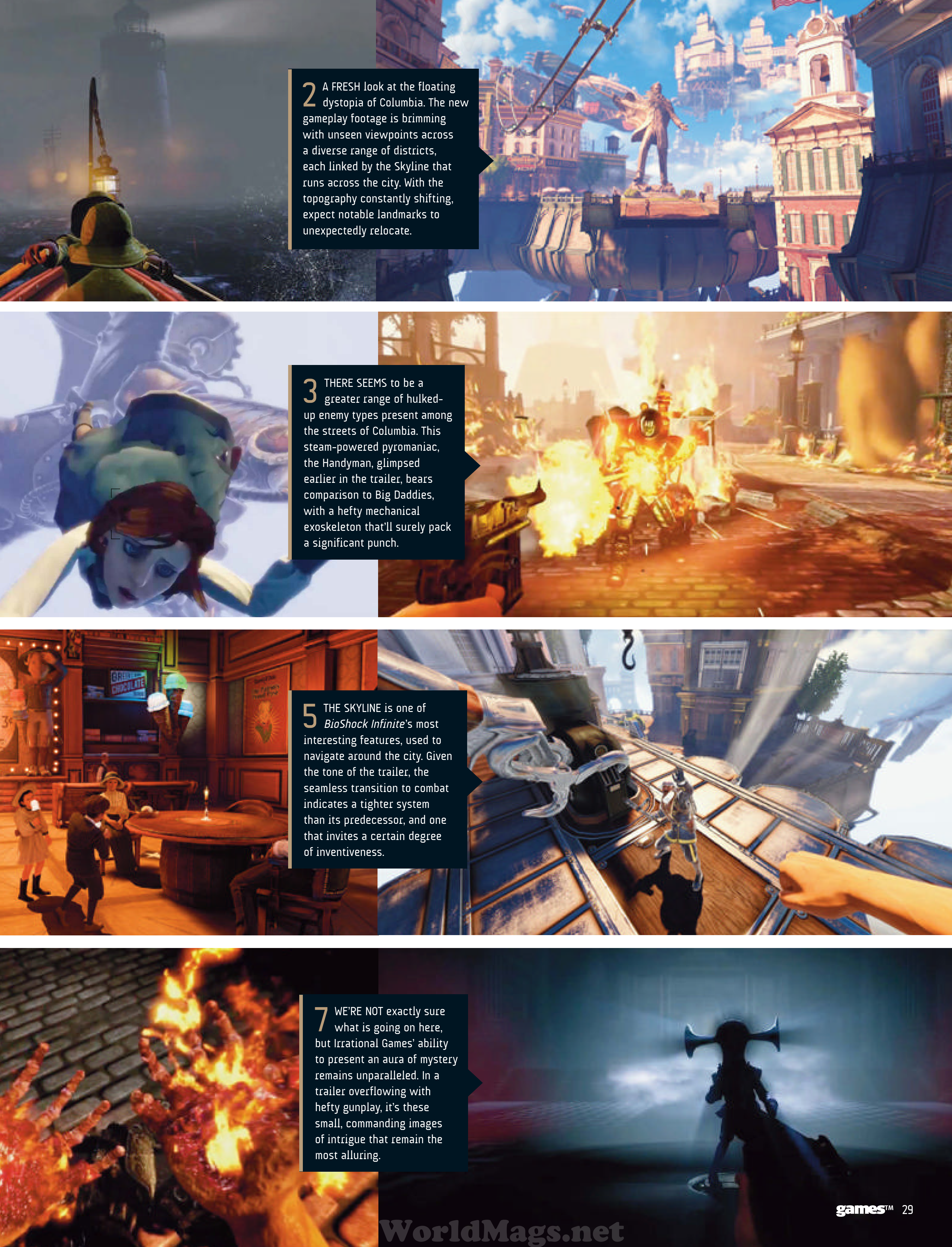
The disquieting tunnels of Rapture deftly balanced robust mechanics and a suitably gripping narrative frame.



4 THERE SEEMS to be a greater focus on the everyday life of the chaste city folk, presenting Columbia in the midst of its downfall, rather than, like Rapture, the aftermath of its demise. With something worth saving other than your own skin, the stakes have been raised.



6 ONE OF the more unsettling images in the trailer. While the physical effect of Plasmids didn't seem to faze *BioShock*'s Jack, here the transformation when consuming Vigors, *Infinite*'s equivalent, has horrific results. We expect Booker to be a more grounded protagonist in that regard.



2 A FRESH look at the floating dystopia of Columbia. The new gameplay footage is brimming with unseen viewpoints across a diverse range of districts, each linked by the Skyline that runs across the city. With the topography constantly shifting, expect notable landmarks to unexpectedly relocate.

3 THERE SEEMS to be a greater range of hulked-up enemy types present among the streets of Columbia. This steam-powered pyromaniac, the Handyman, glimpsed earlier in the trailer, bears comparison to Big Daddies, with a hefty mechanical exoskeleton that'll surely pack a significant punch.

5 THE SKYLINE is one of *BioShock Infinite*'s most interesting features, used to navigate around the city. Given the tone of the trailer, the seamless transition to combat indicates a tighter system than its predecessor, and one that invites a certain degree of inventiveness.

7 WE'RE NOT exactly sure what is going on here, but Irrational Games' ability to present an aura of mystery remains unparalleled. In a trailer overflowing with hefty gunplay, it's these small, commanding images of intrigue that remain the most alluring.

SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

FALLBLOX

Format: **3DS**
Publisher: **Nintendo**
Developer: **Intelligent Systems**
ETA: **November**



A SURPRISE announcement sees 3DS eShop sleeper hit *Pullblox* get a very welcome sequel. This time, whenever you pull a set of blocks forward, any on top will automatically fall down, which should create so many more opportunities for puzzling design that it's hard to imagine *Fallblox* being anything other than extremely difficult. You also collect birds now instead of children.

CRIMSON SHROUD

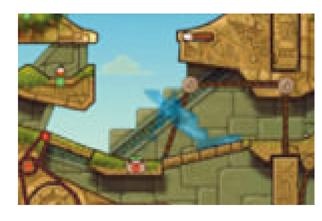
Format: **3DS**
Publisher: **Level-5**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **December**



SUDA51'S *LIBERATION Maiden* is reviewed this issue and will be followed by Yoot Saito's *Aero Porter*, but the potential best game in the *Guild01* series has been left for last. *Crimson Shroud* comes from Yasumi Matsuno, the creator of *Final Fantasy Tactics* and *Vagrant Story*, and is a very unusual multiplayer-only RPG that uses on-screen dice to re-create the feel of a pen-and-paper RPG.

HYDROVENTURE SPIN CYCLE

Format: **3DS**
Publisher: **Nintendo**
Developer: **Curve Studios**
ETA: **December**



THE FIRST *Hydroventure* launched on WiiWare in 2010 and went mostly unnoticed, despite being pretty good. Perhaps it was the fact that everyone had stopped looking at the Wii's online service by that point. Whatever the truth, it's getting a second shot with this 3DS sequel, the major difference being that you control the game by rotating the 3DS to move the world and the puddle of water you control.

EAST VS WEST: A HEARTS OF IRON GAME

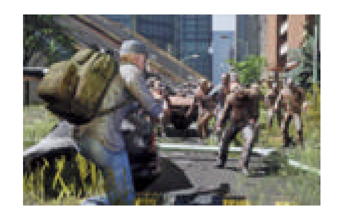
Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Paradox Interactive**
Developer: **BL-Logic**
ETA: **Q2 2013**



IS THIS the most boring game ever? It looks like it, but Paradox Interactive describes it as "the coolest Cold War game ever made". Perhaps both statements are somehow true. Despite boasting visuals that even a German board game enthusiast would sneer at, you can also expect to be able to control any country and play through all four decades of the Cold War. Hopefully in real-time.

THE WAR Z

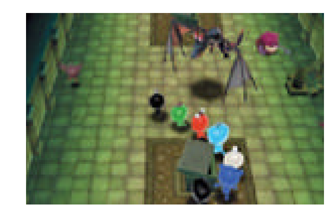
Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Arktos Interactive**
Developer: **Hammerpoint Interactive**
ETA: **Early 2013**



IS *THE WAR Z* just a timely rip-off of *DayZ*, only with prettier graphics and a team of experienced game designers behind it, or does it genuinely do enough to take the emerging 'online survival' genre forward into further greatness? Well, it's now in closed beta so you can find out for yourself, if you pay the required entry fee. Check it out online at **thewarz.com** if you're interested.

THE DENPA MEN: THEY CAME BY WAVE

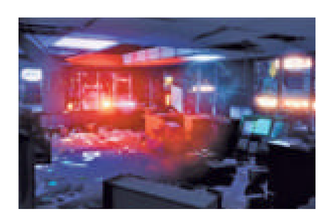
Format: **3DS**
Publisher: **Nintendo**
Developer: **Genius Sonority**
ETA: **December**



AUGMENTED REALITY games are already ten a penny on the 3DS, but there's something about *The Denpa Men* that makes us think it might actually be good. It's largely because, on top of the AR gimmick of finding party members in the real world, this promises to be a deep RPG with a unique sense of humour. We hear it's packed with *Dragon Quest* references too, and that's no bad thing.

RAMBO: THE VIDEO GAME

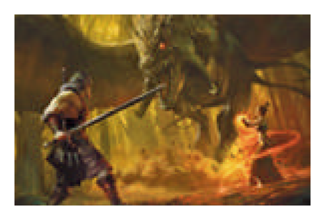
Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Reef Entertainment**
Developer: **Teyon**
ETA: **2013**



WE STILL know little about this strangely timed *Rambo* tie-in, but a solitary new screenshot showing only the final location from the original film, *First Blood*, continues to support our theory that Teyon's "fixed-perspective first person shooter" may end up being a *Lethal Enforcers*-style shooting gallery game, only with slightly nicer graphics. And maybe we'll get to hear Sly crying, "I can't find your legs!" again.

SHAKER

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Loot Drop**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2014**

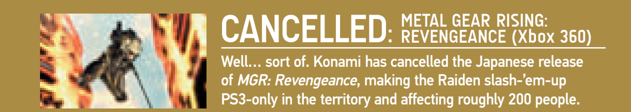


CURRENTLY WELL on the way to its $1 million Kickstarter target, *Shaker* is an "old-school RPG" created by Brenda Brathwaite and Tom Hall, of *Wizardry* and *Doom* fame respectively. The premise is pretty cool – a first-person RPG set in a world bridging future and past, where fantasy and sci-fi clash – but the classic RPG revival has been cornered by Obsidian's *Project Eternity*. Is there really room for another?



DELAYED: RAYMAN LEGENDS (Wii U)

Originally intended as a Wii U launch title, *Rayman Legends* has now slipped to Q1 2013, with an Ubisoft spokesperson telling *MCV*: "We are taking the time to make sure we deliver a game that lives up to and hopefully exceeds expectations."

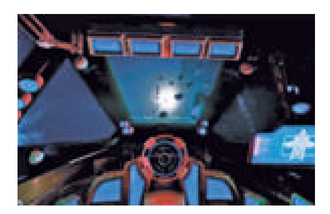


CANCELLED: METAL GEAR RISING: REVENGEANCE (Xbox 360)

Well… sort of. Konami has cancelled the Japanese release of *MGR: Revengeance*, making the Raiden slash-'em-up PS3-only in the territory and affecting roughly 200 people.

STAR CITIZEN

Format: PC
Publisher: Cloud Imperium
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2014



CHRIS ROBERTS, esteemed creator of the *Wing Commander* and *Privateer* series, is out of hiding with a new spaceship simulator called *Star Citizen*. Chris reckons that the genre has been neglected in recent years and that there's plenty of innovation left untapped. As such, he's aiming to make what could be the most ambitious game of its type, if the CG trailer is anything to go by.

CARNAGE HEART EXA

Format: PSP
Publisher: Natsume
Developer: Artdink
ETA: Spring 2013



THE *CARNAGE Heart* series hasn't been seen in the West since its PSone debut, but now its latest incarnation is finally making it into English thanks to Natsume and digital distribution. A turn-based strategy in which you pre-program robots through a brilliantly complex software system, it's basically *Advance Wars* for even nerdier people. Hey! We're counting ourselves in that group, so don't go getting offended.

VALHALLA KNIGHTS 3

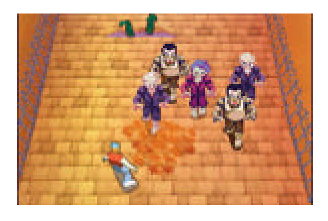
Format: PS Vita
Publisher: Marvelous AQL
Developer: K2
ETA: February 2013



K2'S RPG series may be obscure, but it has a good pedigree for squeezing big open worlds onto a handheld, and it's set to get even more impressive as it moves to the Vita. Curiously, the entire game now takes place inside a prison castle, but it adds multiplayer battles, so it's probably still a huge game. There's no Western release, but the first two games came here courtesy of Rising Star, so maybe this will too.

ZOMBIE SKAPE

Format: DSi
Publisher: EnjoyUp Games
Developer: In-house
ETA: Early 2012



PROOF THAT zombies can be used to spice up just about any genre going, *Zombie Skape* is a skateboarding game with… well, you know. It's a downhill avoid-'em-up, but you'll also have to rescue girls along the way and there will be local leaderboards for arcade-style competitive play. Other than that, it's nice to see a DSiWare release that isn't a piece of software to help learn pre-school maths.

HE-MAN: THE MOST POWERFUL GAME IN THE UNIVERSE

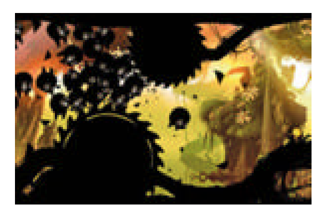
Format: iOS
Publisher: Chillingo
Developer: GlitchSoft
ETA: November



DEADLINES BEING what they are, this may have been released by now, but that won't stop us championing it. The trailer for Chillingo's *He-Man* revival gets the tone spot-on, with some tongue-in-cheek humour aimed at those who remember it the first time round and what looks to be some decent action. Ploughing He-Man straight through a screen of enemies pecs first has to be seen to be believed.

BADLAND

Format: iOS
Publisher: Frogmind Games
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2013



A NEW iOS title from some of the people behind *Trials Evolution*, *Badland* is a pretty auto-scrolling platformer that throws in a number of fatal obstacles along the way. Most can only be passed by collecting the right power-up that changes the state of the main character into something that can survive the oncoming hazard. The presentation screams *Limbo*, but we also detect a little *LocoRoco* influence.

DARKSTALKERS RESURRECTION

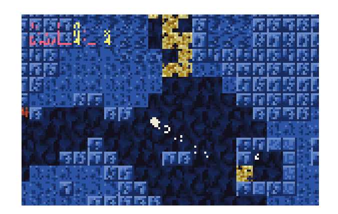
Format: Multi
Publisher: Capcom
Developer: In-house
ETA: Early 2013



IT'S AN old game, but the *Darkstalkers* series has always lived in the shadow of *Street Fighter*, so we have no qualms in shouting about it. Originally running on the CPS2 board, the *Darkstalkers* trilogy looked as lovely as *Street Fighter Alpha* but with a fun horror theme and slightly more accessible gameplay. This collection bundles together the second and third games and paves the way for the fourth.

IKACHAN

Format: DSi, 3DS
Publisher: Nicalis
Developer: Pixel
ETA: Late 2012



FANS OF indie sensation *Cave Story* may be pleased to hear that a remake of Pixel's earlier, but equally cool, *Ikachan* is also being made for modern systems. A dual release for DSiWare and the 3DS eShop, each taking advantage of the host system, the new *Ikachan* will improve upon its underwater exploration with bigger areas, new enemies and a better, official localisation.

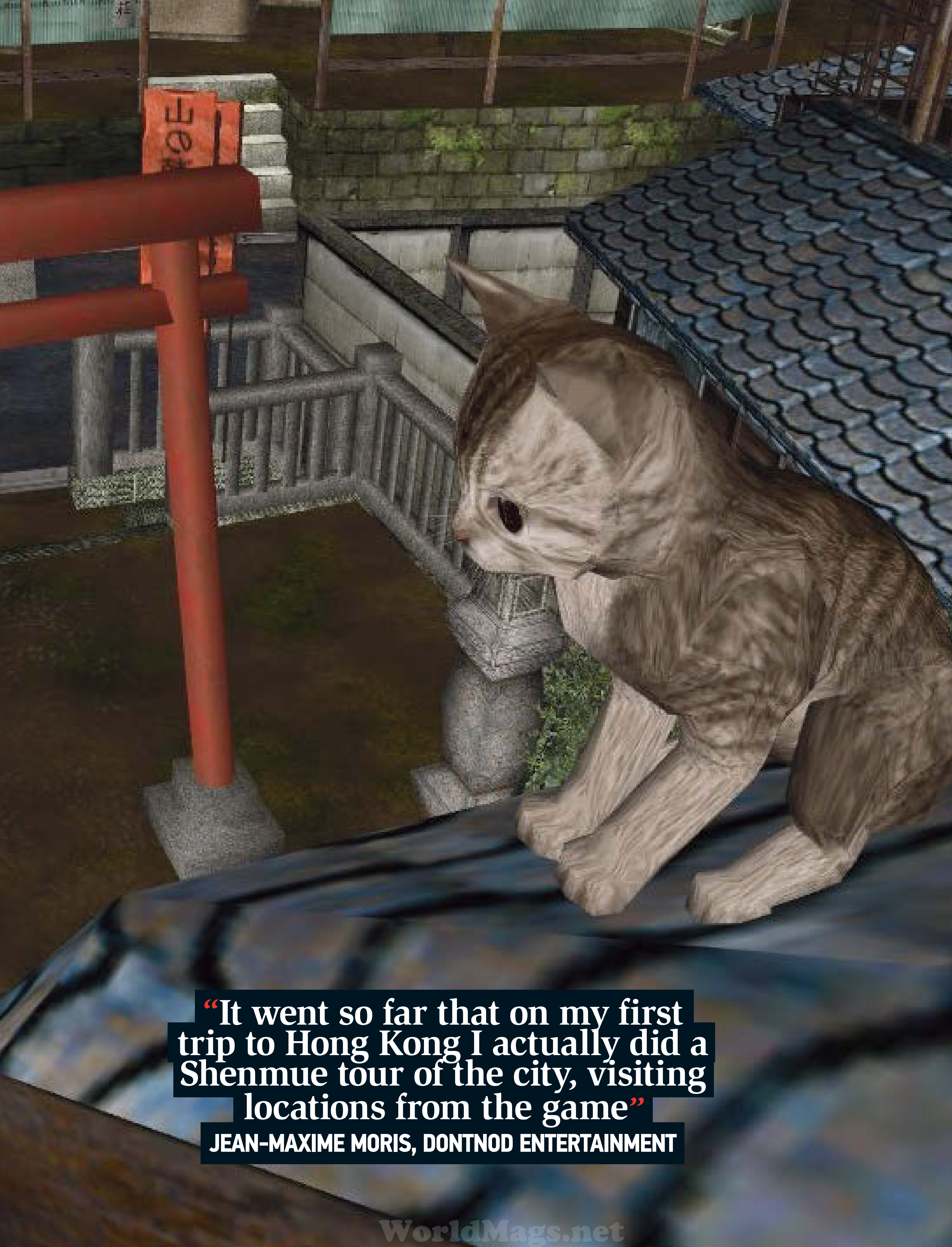


Why I ♥…

Shenmue

JEAN-MAXIME MORIS, DONTNOD ENTERTAINMENT

“*I’m a huge fan of Japanese cinema and Chinese cinema, and* **Shenmue** *was so clichéd, but at the same time so fantastic. All of the individual scenes, the training in the dojo, the catching of the leaves in* **Shenmue II** *or discovering Man Mo Temple in Hong Kong I absolutely adored. It went so far that on my first trip to Hong Kong I actually did a* **Shenmue** *tour of the city, visiting locations from the game. But the sense of freedom in the game was amazing, and it was done in a much more meaningful way than open-world games today, because it was just there to be there and not for you to carry packages from one end of the city to the other. And they invented Quick Time Events and, I’m sorry, but as a developer I think they can be useful. I love every single bit of that game and I would sell my soul to direct* **Shenmue III**.”



> "It went so far that on my first trip to Hong Kong I actually did a Shenmue tour of the city, visiting locations from the game"

JEAN-MAXIME MORIS, DONTNOD ENTERTAINMENT


Wii U
X
Y
A
B
START
SELECT
MIC
HOME
BATTERY
TV
CONTROL
POWER



THE VERDICT

The biggest gaming launch of the year is only a week away. With important questions still unanswered, how should we feel about the Wii U? Excited? Cautious? Even worried? games™ speaks to the developers for a pre-launch verdict on Nintendo's most unusual console yet

What is 'next-gen'? Around 2006, that concept was challenged as the big three launched their latest solutions to achieving gaming nirvana. Microsoft stuck to its guns with an incremental design that expanded heavily on its existing PC architecture, Sony plumped for a radical hardware change that drew praise in equal measure to its criticisms, while Nintendo… well, Nintendo did nothing. Almost. Peeping under the hood and on the face of it, there wasn't exactly a generation's worth of advances between the Wii and its predecessor, the GameCube: a 729MHz processor versus a 486MHz processor, 88MB of memory versus 43MB of memory, and the same 480p resolution supported by both.

The proof was really in the pudding, though, and in the year that followed the Wii's launch, there was often nothing to separate a GameCube game from a Wii game – except the controller. This was Nintendo's trump card for its new hardware, a watershed moment in gaming history. The savvy manufacturer had completely avoided the hardware dick-swinging contest that its rivals were playing and shot for a broader and more lucrative market with a console that was profitable from day one. It alienated many of its hardcore fans, it caused market analysts to shrug their shoulders then scrabble for their spreadsheets, but, most of all, Nintendo had changed the perception of what the future of gaming could hold.

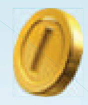
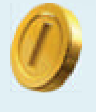
So now, on the dawn of the Wii U's launch, a console that is supposed to herald the return of hardcore gamers to Nintendo's bosom, we have to rely on the people involved in the design of the console and the development of the software for it to define what next gen is. "Next-gen? Or Next-next-gen?" Ubisoft's Gabrielle Shrager, senior scriptwriter on *ZombiU*, asks. "Depends what you mean by that. With the Wii U, Nintendo has definitely recognised the importance of fast chip speeds and cutting-edge graphics, but that is not the heart and soul of the machine." Indeed, the Wii U's power matches what can only be considered current-gen from Microsoft and Sony, but Nintendo has always been in the business of games – if you want bragging rights, surely you'd buy a PC and be done with it?

"Wii U is next-gen in the way that the Wii was," said Mikael Haveri of Frozenbyte. "Clearly revolutionary in many ways, but possibly slightly less on the pure power side. It is a reasonable guess that the next round of competition will trump the specs by a bit, but the important question is if they will also implement a touch interface. So in this way the GamePad is the most important new addition, clearly combining the console experience with the now-very-popular tablets. All of the games are designed with the GamePad as an integral part, and if that proves to be even nearly as popular as the Wii Remote, then Nintendo might actually define next gen."

Even with a later start than both the other consoles, it was clear at an early stage that the Wii was going to win the console war, which inevitably led to Microsoft and Sony attempting to design and improve upon their own proprietary motion-control systems. And it's not just us that thinks its rivals have been keeping a close eye on Nintendo this time around, what with the PS3's Vita connectivity and the 360's SmartGlass. It's hard to tell who's taking a leaf out of whose book, but Nintendo often seems to be the one to push the bar first.

Matt Prior, line producer on *FIFA 13*, is even more upbeat about the potential of the Wii U: "The Wii U is an exciting new piece of hardware that



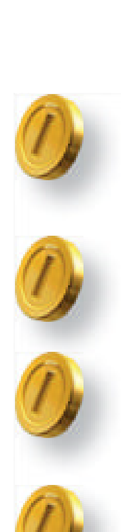




offers opportunities that other consoles can't, simply because of the uniqueness of the platform, in particular the GamePad. We wanted to ensure that we utilised that uniqueness and delivered features that utilised the GamePad, not just in a gimmicky way but in ways that added real value and improvements to the game. Just as important, we wanted to use the power of the GamePad to open up the game to more gamers. Graphically, the Wii U is on par with the Xbox 360 and PS3, and we were even able to make some key graphical improvements."

'Uniqueness' is certainly one aspect that is considered fundamental to a next-gen console. Speaking of a console as a marketable product, defining yourself and distinguishing your offering from the competition is vital to success and, somehow, Nintendo has always managed to do its own thing, on its own terms, and get away with it. Part of that package is having an established portfolio of near-infallible in-house studios and a rock-solid back catalogue of wildly successful franchises crossing multiple generations.

Melanie Faulknor, external producer for the Wii U version of *Mass Effect 3*, is also a fan of the Wii U GamePad. "The way that the GamePad works, where you can take the game that you're playing on the TV and instantly transition it onto the GamePad, I think that in itself is going to become a household standard, because if you are sharing a television, this constant fight for the TV is no longer an issue."

> "If you are sharing a television, this constant fight for the TV is no longer an issue"



Shrager treats it with even more reverence, and understandably so: the requirement to look down and examine the ground via the GamePad's interactive screen is a pivotal part of the *ZombiU* experience. "*ZombiU* is a survival horror FPS that allows players to live a credible and terrifying survival experience in zombie territory," she explains. "We discovered that the Wii U is a perfect fit for survival horror, because, just like in real life, you have to look down and rummage through your bug-out bag to manipulate gear that you actually hold in your hands, all while keeping an eye on the surrounding dangers in real-time! It allowed us to generate tremendous tension, and hence reward, when you survive even a single epic zombie encounter. In *ZombiU*, the two screens become an integral part of the experience because you feel vulnerable, but also because the pad contains all the tools you need to survive. The pad helps players increase situational awareness and master environments in many ways. We can scan enemies and environments for vital supplies, snipe silently from a distance, visualise moving objects on the radar, consult mission objectives, and pin personal objectives on our map. These and other imaginative features truly make the most of what the Nintendo Wii U has to offer: an unparalleled level of immersion and emotion."



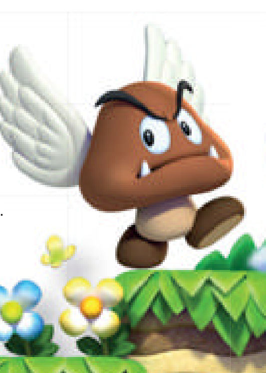
Where, historically, Nintendo has failed its fans is in the same area where Sony and Microsoft have got their fingers on the pulse. PlayStation Network and Xbox Live are a huge credit to their respective consoles, but Nintendo has inexplicably fumbled with the concept of an online infrastructure in the past, limiting multiplayer and connectivity with friends at best and, at worst, outright infuriating its customers. The GameCube made a token effort at online gaming with a paltry four games featuring internet connectivity, while at the same time, Sony and Microsoft surged ahead with their fledgling networks. By the time the Wii arrived, it would have taken a huge drive on Nintendo's part to compete with them, but with little else but sharing virtual items, messaging and the Virtual Console, there's still nothing to write home about in the Wii online space. And as far as 3DS owners are concerned, the less said about friend codes, the better.

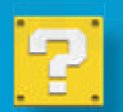
So it's worrying that Nintendo has said so very little about the nature of online gaming for the Wii U. It's gone far beyond the stage where holding a big reveal back until late in the day can yield a glut of press attention. Even now, at the time of writing this article, bringing the subject up elicits little more than a shrug or a short, noncommittal sentence from the people in charge who should know, should care and should definitely be telling a world of Nintendo gamers, looking for that extra dimension to their games, exactly where they stand when it comes to online connectivity. This fact doesn't seem to bother some of the Wii U's launch title developers.

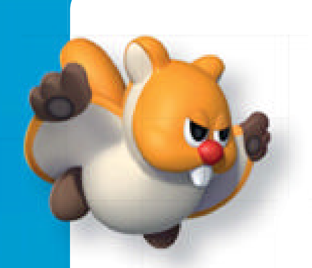
"I think online play is something that will come with time and likely fairly quickly," said Frozenbyte's Mikael Haveri. "*Trine 2: Director's Cut* will have full online and offline multiplayer, so at least we will be there, pioneering among the first. As far as the online capabilities and the eShop, everything looks very cool so far. Of course, this info has been a bit on a need-to-know basis, but what we have learned has looked really promising, especially for an indie company like ours. Their new take on the eShop is a clear game-changer."

Manfred Linzner of Shin'en Multimedia, the German developer of *Nano Assault Neo*, is a little more frank about Nintendo's reluctance to talk about the Wii U online infrastructure. "I think the simple answer to this question is that developing online games takes much more time," he says, "and so such games on launch day are less likely to happen. We already planned to look into Wii U online play for our upcoming games."

Again, we wouldn't be making such a big deal of it if Nintendo had a history of strong support for online console functionality, plus a legacy in the form of a large community from its previous consoles. Matt Prior has similar sentiments: "This is the first outing for Wii U, so it will take time to grow the online community in much the same way it took years for online communities to grow and publishers to develop online features for the PS3 and 360. For *FIFA 13* on Wii U, we wanted to make sure we got the most important features in the game and lay the groundwork for the future. But we also recognised the importance of developing online features, so we brought over FIFA Seasons, which is the most popular online mode in all of *FIFA*, and enables gamers to battle for promotion and relegation in the online space with any other Wii U gamer on the planet. It's very addictive. We also have online friendlies and custom games. Gamers can also upload screenshots and video replays to the web to show off to their friends."







INSIDE Wii U

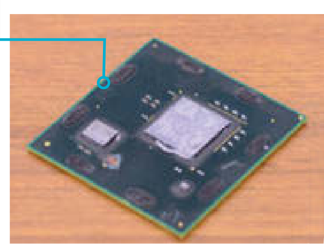
With the focus on the Wii U's GamePad, the console itself has gone mostly ignored until now. Here's what makes it tick



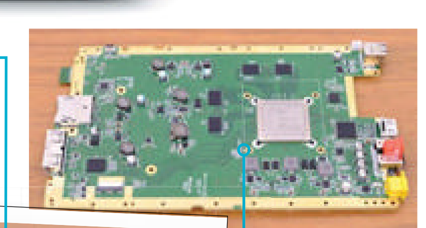
Sync button
This time, the sync button is more easily accessed on the outside of the Wii U front panel.

Optical drive
Nintendo has stuck by its slot-loading optical drive, taking high-density Wii U discs and standard Wii discs.

Multicore CPU
At the heart of the Wii U is this MCM (multi-chip module), a bespoke chip with 45-nanometre CPU core technology designed by IBM.

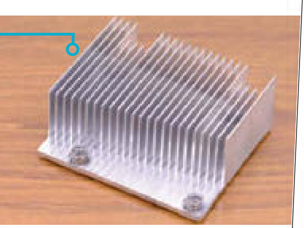


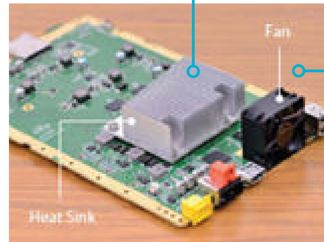
Graphics processing unit
The GPU is built onto the same die as the CPU to improve energy efficiency and data exchange. CPU manufacturers have taken a similar approach with their commercial PC processors recently.



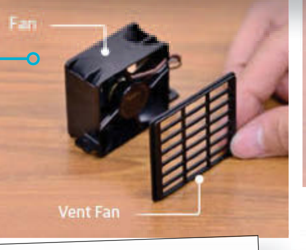
RAM
The Wii U has a total of 2GB of RAM, 1GB of which is reserved for system processes, and the other 1GB for games. It's over 20 times the memory of the Wii.

Heat sink
The Wii U consolidates its two heat sources (GPU and CPU) onto one chip, so the Wii U uses just one finned aluminium heatsink to help cool the chip.



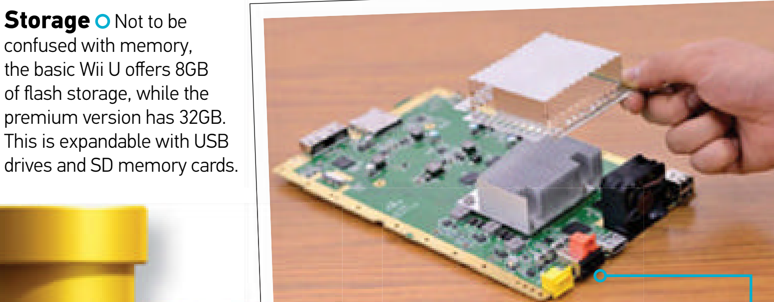


Fan
Bigger processing power means more heat. The Wii U kicks out three times as much hot air as the Wii, so needs a bigger fan to remove the exhaust.



USB connectors
Peripherals connect via USB ports; two at the front and two at the back. Wii U LAN adaptors can also connect via these ports.

Storage Not to be confused with memory, the basic Wii U offers 8GB of flash storage, while the premium version has 32GB. This is expandable with USB drives and SD memory cards.



Vents Airflow is especially vital in the relatively tight space inside the Wii U, so cool air is designed to flow through one vent, across the MCM and out another vent perpendicular to the inlet.



Audio output
Six-channel digital sound is carried out via the HDMI port, while analogue is taken care of by the AV multi-out jack.

Beyond the launch

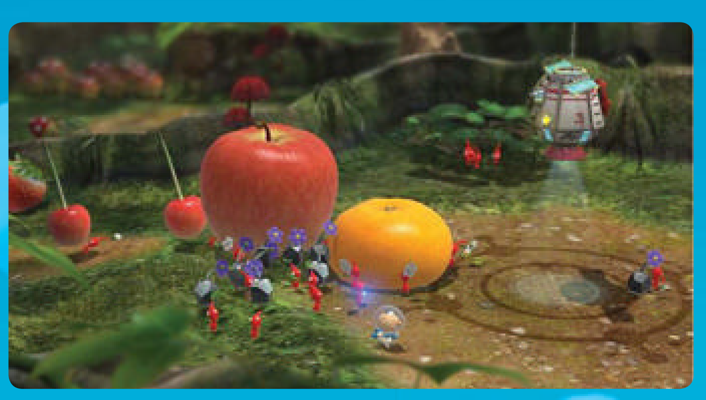
The Wii U has a fairly strong launch line-up, including the likes of *Nintendo Land*, *New Super Mario Bros U* and *ZombiU*, but the best is yet to come. Here are some of our picks for 2013 and beyond…



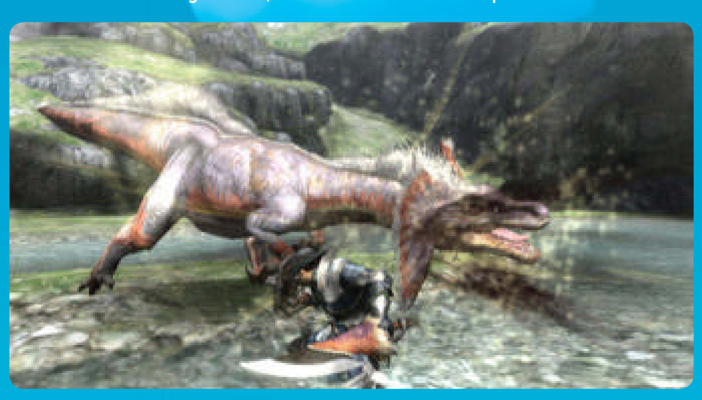
BAYONETTA 2 An exclusive to the Wii U, much to the chagrin of Xbox and PS3 gamers, it features the same sexy witch and her signature pistol-flourishing, magic and melee as the acclaimed first game. We can only speculate as to how the Wii U pad will be used – perhaps as an inventory for unlocked moves?



DRAGON QUEST X It was a hit on the Wii, so Nintendo is bringing this quasi-MMORPG into its full potential on the Wii U. With only a few hours offline play available, players must form a group with others in *Dragon Quest*'s big open world of Astoria. Combat cues and inventory items will likely be accessed via the Wii U GamePad during combat, while it functions as a map on the world screen.



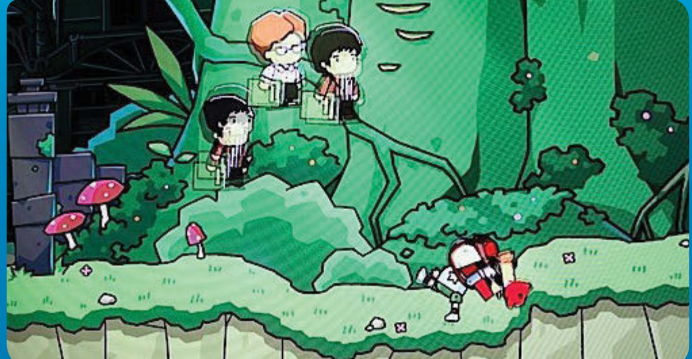
PIKMIN 3 The long-overdue direct sequel to *Pikmin 2* finally leapfrogs the Wii and onto the Wii U next year. It improves upon the popular strategy of *Pikmin 2*, granting players the control of a horde of Pikmin via four different leaders. Most of the original Pikmin types make a return, while the white and purple varieties are known to be hidden somewhere in the game.



MONSTER HUNTER 3 ULTIMATE The remake of the 2010 Wii hit doesn't just come with a new coat of paint. The graphical update complements new features on the GamePad, plus additional story content that includes new quests and entirely new areas to explore. Players can also connect with the 3DS version and exchange data between the consoles.



RAYMAN LEGENDS After the success of *Rayman Origins*, Nintendo was keen to secure the sequel to the slightly twisted platformer for itself. *Rayman Legends* features GamePad input, of course, with certain puzzles and objects that can only be interacted with using it. *Legends* incorporates NFC technology, so other Ubisoft characters can be imported into the game.



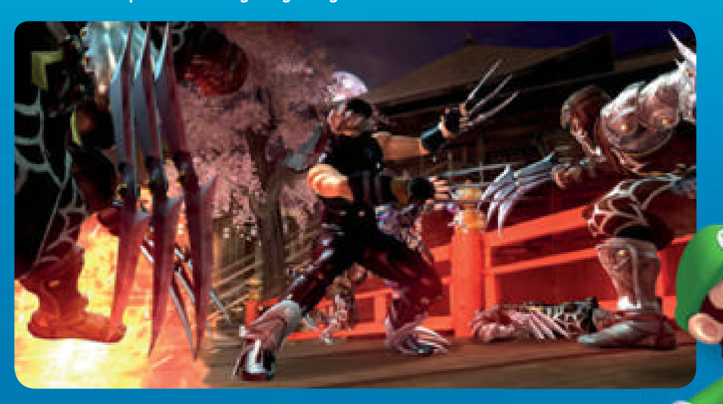
SCRIBBLENAUTS UNLIMITED Warner Bros' addictive puzzler is making an exclusive comeback. It works under the same premise as the previous games in the series, but now in a large open world that the player can explore. *Scribblenauts Unlimited* also supports a two-player co-operative mode and online components in which players can share custom-drawn objects.



THE WONDERFUL 101 Platinum Games is releasing this strategy-action title for the Wii U in its launch window. It's quirky, to say the least, with the player controlling 100 small and thoroughly individual superheroes at once, each with their own power, defending the world from alien invasion. The GamePad is used to arrange units and devise tactics, among other things.



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA Apparently, it's the biggest *Zelda* game ever, and although in these days of sprawling, Bethesda-style RPGs that's a tantalising prospect, that's not what defines a *Zelda* game. Wii U *Zelda* follows the same style and mood that was set by *Skyward Sword*, with the GamePad used to follow trails and avoid traps while navigating dungeons.



NINJA GAIDEN 3: RAZOR'S EDGE It's based on the 360 and PS3 version but comes with a slew of new content for the Wii U. Extra weapons, new baddies, additional levels and a brand new upgrade system are included. The GamePad acts as a controller to select weapons, check objectives, and see any details about an enemy.

It's becoming apparent at this juncture that developers know the online features they're putting into their Wii U games, but either don't know or are unable to say exactly how their projects will work within the Wii U's online infrastructure. We know about the Wii U's Miiverse, Nintendo's social network that allows text and video communication as well as interaction with smartphones at some point in its future. The eShop is being expanded with retail games available as downloads on day one. Nintendo TVii, meanwhile, is poised to take the Wii U beyond the gaming sphere. But setting up online accounts, leaderboards and how 'Accomplishments' will work, as well as the process of Wii U online gaming itself, is information that's privy only to the highest levels of management, apparently. There was, however, some hint of how accounts might be set up in a recent update of EA's privacy policy, amended to include the Wii U. "If you sign up to play EA games through a Nintendo Wii U console," it said, "your Nintendo account information will be provided to EA so that we can establish an Origin account for you. You need an Origin account to play EA's titles online."

> "The process of Wii U online gaming is privy only to the highest levels of management"

It sounds like, for EA at least, gamers might be using a similar system to the 360 and PS3, in which the Origin account is piggybacked onto a standard console network sign-in, though there's nothing to suggest a dedicated server is out of the question. It's an idea that's backed up by FarSight Studios' Robert Mann: "The hold-up of some other companies going online with the Wii U is the reliance on Nintendo's servers. We have our own dedicated server to our game as well as cross-platform leaderboards. We are not reliant on any third-person server to host our game through, and we are looking forward to having tournaments on that platform. The online potential for the Wii U is there and waiting to be used by the developers."

At least Nintendo's launch line-up is reassuring. There are a reasonable number of ports, offering expanded Wii U versions of stellar titles like *Batman: Arkham City* and *Darksiders II*. *FIFA 13* and *Black Ops II* extend their definition of 'multiformat' to include the new console now that Nintendo has caught up with current hardware, while third-party exclusives like *ZombiU* and *Scribblenauts Unlimited* help make the Wii U a Christmas list must. The expected cheap cash-ins are fairly thin on the ground this time – no sign of anything remotely as awful as *Super Fruit Fall* and its ilk.

A total of 23 games are available on launch in Europe, only two of which are first-party titles, *Nintendo Land* and *New Super*

Mario Bros U. Reassuring, because it means Nintendo is confident enough in its line-up for launch day to hold off its big guns until next year and beyond. As exciting as the prospect might sound, opening shop with the likes of *Zelda*, *Super Smash Bros*, *Metroid* and their kin would surely be a sign of weakness, an opinion that Nintendo president Satoru Iwata appeared to agree with in a recent statement to his investors: "If you look at how pre-orders are doing at the moment, it is not an exaggeration to say that Wii U is sure to sell well in this holiday season. But we realise the biggest challenge is to make sure that Wii U sells well even in the next year after the holiday season, and we are working on that too.

"Nintendo tends to release too many titles at the launch of a hardware system and as a result suffers a drop in new games for quite some time after launch, and for the Wii U launch, we are being very careful not to let it happen."

If we read between the lines there, Iwata could easily have been admitting to the drop-off in quality of Wii games after its launch. There was no shortage of releases following the launch of the Wii, but the boatloads of shovelware being shipped for the console game price they commanded hardly counted to Nintendo fans, and that's where rumours began to spread that Nintendo had abandoned its core customer. "Post-launch success is really reliant on developers making more awesome games," said Haveri, "so mainly first-party titles showing off innovation and then also third-party titles having the guts to do more for the console when the design process is clearly different. Right now Ubisoft and many others seem to be very busy developing for the Wii U and all looks good, but I really hope that all the indie companies out there also find this platform."

> "The biggest challenge is to make sure Wii U sells well even in the next year after the holiday season"

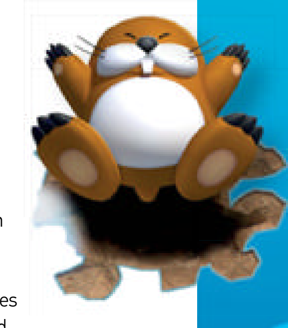
The raw hardware of the Wii U is promising, more on a par with what you'd expect from a competitive modern console, even if Sony and Microsoft's answer to the Wii U will undoubtedly outclass Nintendo's hardware. It incorporates the same on-chip GPU design as the Wii, but with much improved 45-nanometre core technology – a smaller manufacturing process for increased chip efficiency. The Wii U features 2GB of RAM, a minimum of 8GB of internal flash storage (32GB for the premium version), the latest standard in Wi-Fi and, of course, 1080p video resolution support over HDMI. The casing has been shrunk deliberately to reduce the appearance of the console itself, an aesthetic choice that Nintendo says turns it into a "stagehand", acting behind the scenes rather than taking the limelight. Unfortunately, as most PC enthusiasts will know, a smaller chassis gets hotter more quickly, so Nintendo had its work cut out finding the right cooling solutions.

The result of this new Nintendo platform? "The Wii U development environment allowed us to go from zero to a great, polished game in only half a year," says Linzner. "I think we never ever got so far so fast on a new hardware, and we've worked on a lot of platforms in past decades."

"The hardware is powerful and we haven't had any limitations," said *Rayman Legends* developer Michael Micholic. "Visually, because we've had more time with the UbiArt engine, we were able to add a lot of depth to the graphics. You can especially see it in the backgrounds. There are more layers, more details; it feels more like a landscape. We've also done a lot with the lighting effects, both in gameplay and graphics."

"We decided to add a local two-player mode where one player uses the TV and the other one the Wii U GamePad," Linzner tells us. "That meant the complete game world would need to be rendered twice for the Wii U GamePad display. That nearly doubled the burden on the GPU and CPU, but even then we were still able to maintain solid 60fps without much effort on both displays. Then on top we even added camera streaming, so that the TV player can see the face of the Wii U GamePad player, which adds a lot of fun. We expected the additional camera encoding and streaming would add noticeable strain on the Wii U, but it was almost free. All this proved the system is very well balanced and allows developers, without much effort, to use all of the unique features. Another benefit of the Wii U is that the system memory is so large that we never have to load an asset again. Everything can be cached, and load times are almost gone."

No question, then. Developers are fans of the Wii U hardware, which bodes well for encouraging third-party development on the system in the future.



"When comparing the Wii U to other consoles, it honestly all comes back to the GamePad," Micholic says. "This new controller has changed how we think about co-op, single-player, level design, hidden rooms… Everything, really. It's an exciting evolution for the game and a very different experience for the players."

Nintendo has experienced ebbs in popular opinion in the past, but it has always deliberately stepped out of pace with the competition, often changing the game in the process, and for that it deservedly receives kudos. Developers and gamers are cautiously excited about the Wii U, but how do those in the know think it will fare in the future?

"The console will depend on the 4K TVs and whether or not they take off," says Robert Mann. "As the 4K TVs become more and more popular, the Wii U will suffer much like the Wii did."

"It's always a hard one to call, right?" Matt Prior tells us when posed the same question. "Particularly with the financial climate now, you don't know how people are going to think. They're doing a lot of cool stuff with integration with TV as well, right? I think gone are the days of a dedicated gaming machine."

Linzner sums up the positive mood for us: "What I learned from the past is that it is still the games that make a console. Nintendo and other publishers made a great start. Nintendo also pushes the eShop right from the start of the console. When this momentum is kept going then I think the Wii U will be another milestone console for Nintendo."

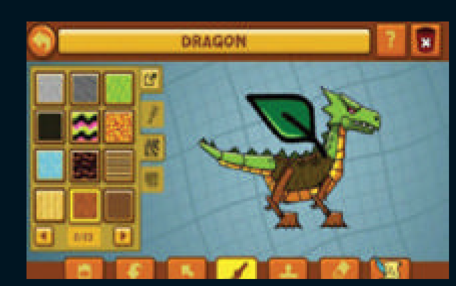
Five best ways to use the Wii U GamePad

There's more to the GamePad than playing while someone's watching EastEnders...



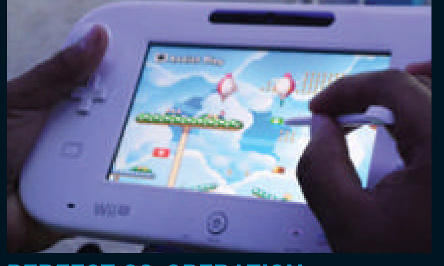
SHAKIN' ZOMBIES

Our favourite has to be *ZombiU*'s use of the GamePad. It acts as a scanner to reveal hidden zombies and a sniper scope, among other things, but if the zombies get a hold of you – and at some point they will – a vigorous shake of the pad will temporarily see them off.



DOODLE PAD

Scribblenauts Unlimited has probably been one of the most natural transitions to the Wii U. Your TV becomes the main screen, while the GamePad acts as a notebook, allowing you to experiment with doodles before bringing them to life on the main screen.

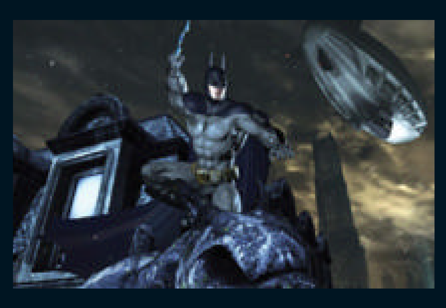


PERFECT CO-OPERATION

One of the main features of a touchscreen device is that multiple players can play a single-player game at once. *New Super Mario Bros U* allows the main player to get on with controlling Mario while others can use the touchscreen to place blocks or knock enemies back.

REMOTE CONTROL

Arkham City Armored Edition maps Batman's inventory to the GamePad. What's unusual is what the GamePad does for the Batarang: lob one, and the Pad becomes the remote control, giving you an over-the-shoulder perspective of the flying Batarang.





DUAL 3D OUTPUT

It's not been officially confirmed, but an Ubisoft project manager has hinted that *Assassin's Creed III* for the Wii U supports stereoscopic 3D output to the GamePad as well as the TV. As long as the TV supports 3D, of course.

THE MAKING OF:

NEW SUPER MARIO BROS U

This game couldn't have been made under more pressure. It's the first new Mario launch title since Mario 64, and has the unenviable task of introducing the Wii U GamePad to hardcore gamers and newcomers alike. How did the team cope? Director Masataka Takemoto and veteran producer Takashi Tezuka explain all…

This is the fourth *New Super Mario Bros* game now. What did you aim to do differently with this sequel and how did the Wii U GamePad influence those choices?

Masataka Takemoto: The traditional *Mario* gameplay is definitely fun in its own right, and we wanted to add something new that would go together naturally with that traditional gameplay. Also, while we were searching for ways to cater to the five-year-olds and 95-year-olds of Nintendo's '5 to 95' philosophy, the Wii U GamePad arrived on the scene. This allowed us to come up with Boost mode, which is a new game mechanic that experienced gamers can enjoy, but at the same time is really accessible to beginners.

We wanted the game to be set in a world that feels 'connected', and so we went with the connected maps like in *Super Mario World*. One of the reasons we decided on this was because of how well suited it is to giving players a kind of feeling of being connected to others through Miiverse. And it also has the benefit of having a lovely map that you can admire.

Were there new ideas that don't appear in the game?

Takashi Tezuka: Of course, like previous games, there were ideas that we did not use in the end this time, but of those, there are some that we would like to expand on, and bring to fruition in the next title. Incidentally, the Challenge mode in this game is something we decided not to include in *New Super Mario Bros Wii*, but after making the idea public on our website, it has seen the light of day, and is featured in this game.

We try to stock up on ideas, and as in the above example, we try to utilise them in the sequel or in a completely different title.

As well as the GamePad, the Wii U also boasts innovation through its Miiverse network. How did you look to make use of that?

MT: Players can now use the Miiverse framework to share their emotions with the world. This is possible in two situations. The first is when you have completed a course, you will be asked, 'Would you like to post your thoughts to Miiverse?' So if you have played well you can boast about it, or if you struggled through the course then you can share that pain. These posts will be displayed as speech bubbles above the corresponding courses for other players. The second is when you have failed on a course. The thoughts that you share here will be shown to other players who also fail in similar places. So you can share, and also ease the pain, knowing that others have made similar mistakes.

Where did the idea of Boost Rush mode come from and what do you think players will enjoy about it?

MT: In this game, we tried to search for things that were new, but would also fit into the 2D *Mario* framework. Boost mode is one of them, and Boost Rush is another. In recent titles in the franchise, there has been more opportunity to get 1-ups, and the value of collecting coins is less prominent than in previous games. In *New Super Mario Bros 2*, collecting coins was positioned as a major aim of the game, but in *New Super Mario Bros U* we wanted to give the players a different objective regarding collecting coins, to allow them to play the same courses under a different light. Also, another aim of ours was to provide a new game mechanic that utilises Boost mode. Boost Rush can, of course, be played on your own, but we would like it if people could play it with two or more players, and also use Boost mode. Boost mode gives you a chance to try for even better times. By playing over and over, you can plan out when to get coins. And when you have multiple



New Super Mario Bros U takes the mantle of a launch game, introducing players to a range of the new hardware's functionality.

players you can work out who goes for which coins and who hits the Question Blocks that contain the power-ups.

You developed *NSMBU* at the same time as the 3DS's *NSMB2*. What kind of things did you do to make sure the two games were different enough from each other?

TT: 2D scrolling-type *Mario* games have always tried to not stray from the original gameplay, but at the same time add new characteristics and features by incorporating the unique qualities and features of the respective hardware. This is what we work on at the start of the project. As the foundation for *New Super Mario Bros 2* we had gameplay designed to keep you coming back for more, and then we built up on that. We added mechanics that make you want to collect more coins, introduced Gold Mario and also created the Coin Rush mode. *New Super Mario Bros U*, however, was based on the desire to improve further the four-player multiplayer first seen in the Wii game. And so we came up with new game mechanics such as Boost Rush and also Boost mode, which makes use of the GamePad.

What have you learned from the release of *NSMB2*'s DLC levels, and do you plan to create DLC for *NSMBU*?

MT: We came up with all kinds of ideas for add-on content for *Mario*. However, not all of it has been released yet and there is still more we can learn. We would like to spend some time gaining experience and analysing our results so we can use them as reference for creating future add-on content, although we don't know if that will be for *New Super Mario Bros U*.

We haven't seen a new *Mario* game at launch since the N64. What are the challenges of preparing a new *Mario* game as a launch title?

MT: When releasing a game at launch, the challenge is to have *Mario* be the catalyst to get the excitement going for the hardware. So compared to *Mario* games that are released outside the launch window, it becomes ever so important that this is a *Mario* game that is only possible because of the new hardware. Also, with new hardware, players will be introduced to new controls they aren't familiar with. In this case, the Wii U GamePad. With a brand new franchise, people won't have any difficulty accepting it being different, since they'll just think of it as a new game. But as this is a 2D *Mario* platformer and people are already familiar with those games, we needed to come up with a gameplay style that people could be comfortable with right off the cuff.

> "It becomes important that this is a Mario game that is only possible because of the new hardware"

How important is the Wii U's HD display and what did it allow you to do differently to previous games?

MT: Whether it is HD or not is not an important factor for *Mario*'s gameplay. However, in this game, Mii characters can be used as playable characters. One of the major factors that allowed this to be possible was that with HD, you could still identify your Mii character even if they moved away from each other and were very small on the screen.

***New Super Mario Bros Wii* sold more than both *Mario Galaxy* games combined. Why are the 2D *Mario* games so much more popular than the 3D games?**

MT: I don't think it's because one game is better made than the other. It's just that compared to 2D, there seems to be more people who are not as comfortable with 3D controls. And maybe a wider range of people were more accepting of the *New Super Mario Bros* series, which may have seemed simpler to them.

Although debuting with another 2D *Mario* game might disappoint some long-time Nintendo fans, the commercial popularity of *New Super Mario Bros* is inarguable.

***Super Mario Bros 2* allowed players to play as Princess Peach, but the *NSMB* games use two Toads instead. Why isn't Peach playable?**

MT: In *Super Mario Bros 2*, Princess Peach had her own unique moves and animation. In this series, we want all the players to have the same moves and animations as Mario, and Princess Peach isn't suited for that.

Finally, do you foresee a time when players will be able to create and share their own stages, like *LittleBigPlanet*?

MT: I think the Coin Edit feature in Coin Battle is a step closer to that. There is a possibility of this happening in the future, but there's no use just blindly making that feature available. We would need to carefully think about how to make such a system work. The important thing is that it has to be something that is uniquely Nintendo. Where a beginner can easily make something and have a good time, and simultaneously, someone who is really into *Mario* can delve into it deeper and make something more complex. So that is a challenge we will need to tackle in the future.





HORRIFIC EVOLUTION

FEAR, THEY SAY, COMES IN MANY FLAVOURS, AND WHILE NO HORROR GAME CAN RELY ON A SINGLE PALETTE OF TERROR, DEAD SPACE 3 IS SEEING SOME DRASTIC CHANGES. IS IT A GAMBLE WORTH TAKING FOR VISCERAL OR A STEP TOO FAR?

The *Dead Space* games have always been a terrifying feast of fear, but for some fans early glimpses of *Dead Space 3* were heart-stopping for entirely different reasons. At first glance, it appeared that Visceral Games, perhaps because of publisher pressure and market research, was going to 'action up' its horror franchise. To some reactionary fans, the inclusion of cover shooter mechanics, more fluid movement, outdoor boss encounters, and two-player co-op were the antithesis of the *Dead Space* spirit. To be fair, other survival horror franchises – notably *Resident Evil* – have recently stumbled in attempting to inject action elements into their formula, but according to Visceral Games general manager Steve Papoutsis, *Dead Space*, having never just relied upon any single gameplay approach, is different.

"Ultimately, when we sit down to make a *Dead Space* game, there are certain things the game has to have," he explains. "Intense atmosphere, outstanding visuals, thrills, tension, scares and, yeah, action. You need to have all of that to make a great game."

Dead Space, he claims, has always tapped into the series' themes of fear in various ways. "You need to have varied pacing for players to experience the highs and lows. It's a rollercoaster experience."

Just as importantly, *Dead Space 3* is a personal story about Isaac Clarke, showing how the retiring and terrified engineer from *Dead Space* has been forced to become a warrior as the series progressed. "If you look around, Isaac Clarke is the galaxy's primary Necromorph-slayer," says Papoutsis. "Nobody else has been able to deal with them as successfully. So, for us, it just doesn't make sense for him to continue to be a clumsy character that's not capable. He can't be scared every time he sees a Slasher; he's seen them now through multiple games."

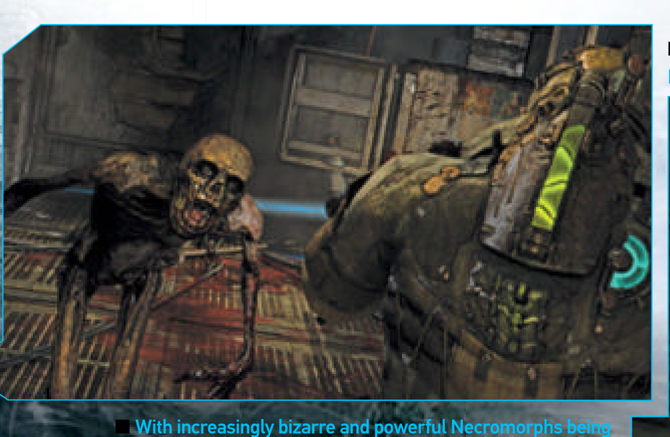
Clarke's narrative evolution, Papoutsis asserts, motivated everything in *Dead Space 3*, including combat mechanics like the ability to dodge, take cover, and craft bespoke weapons – all as reflections of Isaac's growing prowess as a warrior. "This is a journey for Isaac, where he needs to come to grips with who he is, where he's at, and what's important." That narrative approach and a desire to give players a wider perspective on the fiction, Papoutsis says, inspired the creation of companion character John Carver and co-op for *Dead Space 3*. "Carver actually has his own unique narrative that you'll get to see when you play co-op, so he's not just a throwaway soldier. He's got his own thing going on and back story that we're trying to develop."

Visceral is advancing its world-building and set pieces in a similar way, sending Clarke on a terror-filled odyssey. *Dead Space 3* is packed with epic moments like escaping a disintegrating space cruiser and blasting through the spiralling ruins of a spaceship graveyard called the Lost Flotilla, thrown into direct contrast with more traditional play, spent creeping through the bowels of derelict wrecks while being stalked by Necromorph foes. But it's the snow-covered world of Tau Volantis that Isaac and Carver go to in order to save Isaac's girlfriend and uncover the truth behind the corrupting alien Markers. That's *Dead Space 3*'s jewel in the crown.



Despite its contrast to any previous environments, or any lazy *Lost Planet 3* comparisons, Tau Volantis feels distinctly *Dead Space*, which Papoutsis says is key. "If you look back at the Ishimura, I think there was a distinct personality to that location. The Sprawl from *Dead Space 2* had a similar depth. With Tau Volantis, we wanted the planet to speak to players in a specific way."

Tau Volantis's snowy wastes are uniquely beautiful but savage vistas, bringing to mind HP Lovecraft's *At The Mountains Of Madness* and echoes of John Carpenter's *The Thing* as you explore dark, Necromorph-filled caverns. All of this, Papoutsis claims, fuels *Dead Space 3*'s survival horror element. "It's inherently hostile. You're out in the elements, it's



■ With increasingly bizarre and powerful Necromorphs being constantly introduced, *Dead Space 3* has lost none of its fearsome edge.

■ If you want to experience *Dead Space 3* as a tense solo experience, you're perfectly free to do so, but there's arguably even more depth in co-op.





■ Visceral Games is attempting to create a uniquely paced game with all the highs of a sci-fi thriller, brought into contrast with its bloody survival horror.

cold, it's frightening, it's mysterious. That planet has to deliver on those emotions on its own, and the theme of survival is there as you survive this place."

Set pieces throughout Tau Volantis echo this sentiment as you brave snowstorms, survive landslides, plunge into caverns and even battle in a giant chamber with a massive drill bit, dodging it as you fight while it gruesomely pulps enemies – it's a platform of epic adventure being used to progress the series' fiction. "In *Dead Space 3*, we really wanted to answer a lot of questions," Papoutsis promises. "There's a lot of detail about the Unitologists, the Markers and the Necromorphs that we haven't come out and answered, so one of our aims is to deliver answers to our players."

While *Dead Space 3*'s single-player mode has proven it still feels right, like many fans we questioned whether it was possible to maintain the series' feel in co-op. But playing as Isaac and Carver, battling our way through infested research stations on Tau Volantis, we quickly discover that the new location, more Necromorphs, and the Lovecraftian psychosis caused by the Markers effectively translate that familiar fear into the co-op experience. Combat is a slightly different affair with another player, given how you can support each other, but still retains its brutal, up-close character. Players' movement is far more fluid, especially with the new combat roll, but the inclusion of faster types of Necromorph like Twitchers, which rush you, spewing attacking tentacles, leave little room for error. Players can revive each other if downed, but only as long as their partner isn't dismembered, and with a growing list of new Necromorphs, including Feeders and horrific evolutions of old favourites like Slashers and Leapers, staying in one piece is a challenge.

As well as fighting the Necromorph menace, Clarke and Carver encounter the religious zealots of the Church of Unitology. This Marker-worshipping human cult has long been a series mainstay and a background menace, but we've never previously got to fight them. Armoured, gun-toting fanatics, who have their own twisted agenda on Tau Volantis, add an exciting new dimension to combat. "Strictly from a designer's viewpoint, the Necromorphs are great adversaries, but we didn't have a lot of ranged enemies," admits producer Shereif Fattouh, "so adding that layer of strategy and more ranged attacks was a cool way to fill that gap." They certainly provide a contrast to the more melee-based Necromorphs, needing to be fought more tactically and using *Dead Space 3*'s new cover system.



With survival harder than ever, you'll need to ensure you have the right weapons. Visceral has revamped the entire crafting system in *Dead Space 3*, producing not only one of the most expansive and flexible modular weapon-creation systems in gaming, but cleverly tying it to gameplay with a resource-gathering mechanic. Clarke and Carver have bots that can be sent out to find the dozens of parts and engineering items needed to create weapons with myriad fire modes and additional effects.

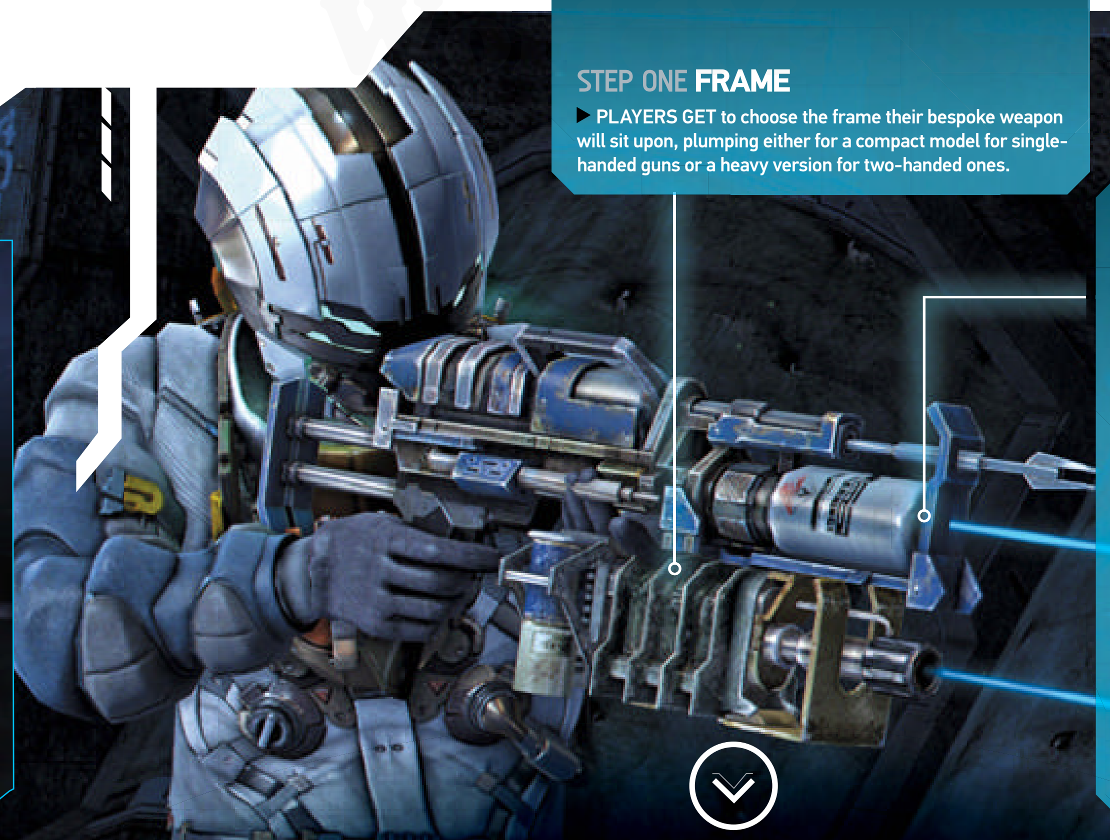
We played as Carver, sporting an armour-piercing machine gun with a flamethrower for close-quarters work, while our partner toted an explosive railgun with an acid bath attachment, perfect for damaging attackers over time. Weapons are created at workbenches scattered across maps, and players can either find blueprints or just tinker, allowing for the creation of deadly new weapons and familiar ones from previous games. "So if you really loved the Plasma Cutter, as long as you have enough resources you'll be able to build that," promises Fattouh. "But now you'll also be able to modify it as well. You could take a Plasma Cutter and add a flamethrower or railgun or an acid bath attachment to it."

It's the kind of system that encourages exploration, with certain items only being found in particular locations, and ties in to *Dead Space 3*'s open-world elements. The inclusion of entirely optional objectives for players seeking deeper story details and new equipment for weapon-crafting finds its ultimate expression in co-op, which, while following the same story as single-player, has extra narrative missions.

"We wanted to make sure that players who experienced single-player would get the story, the answers they were looking for, and have a great time," explains Papoutsis, "but we wanted co-op to be additive, so when you jumped in as Carver you are now experiencing something different. The narrative is still the same, what happens in the end is still the same, but the things that happen within the journey are different. You're going to get different visions, different dialogue, and it's going to feel like a different perspective on the game."

We get a taste of that playing as Carver in a sequence underscoring just how *Dead Space 3* is going to grab co-op players' hearts with the clammy hand of fear. The theme of psychosis has always been key to *Dead Space*, and in this game John Carver is slowly going insane thanks to the Markers' influence. That has a direct impact on gameplay, and battling a brace of Necromorphs in a dark underground research facility, our world suddenly started to weirdly twist, becoming a demonic nursery, its walls adorned with gigantic, leering wooden toy soldiers. Our partner's face became similarly demonic, and as our condition worsened, the real world was obscured

"PLAYERS CAN FIND BLUEPRINTS OR JUST TINKER, CREATING DEADLY NEW WEAPONS"



STEP ONE FRAME

▶ PLAYERS GET to choose the frame their bespoke weapon will sit upon, plumping either for a compact model for single-handed guns or a heavy version for two-handed ones.

STEP TWO UPPER TOOL

▶ THESE TOOLS allow you to modify your weapon's primary attacks, letting you make everything from electrical blasters to flamethrowers. The parts revealed so far are:

MILITARY ENGINE: A military weapon used by SCAF forces
PNEUMATIC TORCH: An incendiary device fuelled by compressed gas
PLASMA CORE: A cutting tool that fires ionised plasma fuel
TESLA CORE: An engine for high-current electric welding
TELEMETRY SPIKE: A mining tool that fires tempered alloy bolts
SURVEY CHARGE: A seismic tool that fires explosive canisters
RIP CORE: A short-range suspended saw blade tool
HYDRAULIC CUTTER: A bayonet-like cutting tool, used for clearing large areas

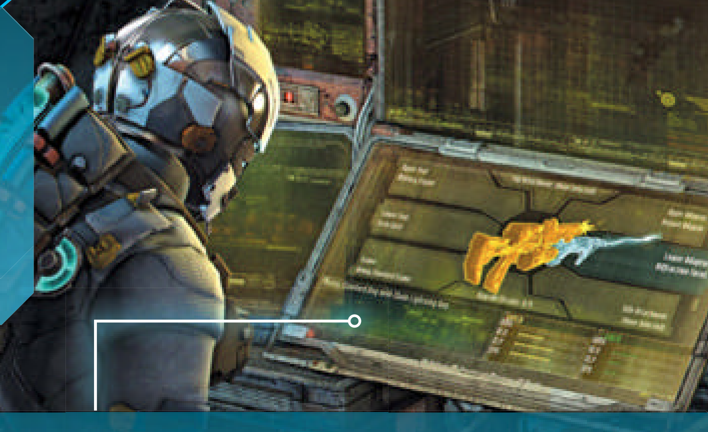
CHOOSE YOUR WEAPON

Visceral has totally revamped the series' weapon-crafting suite, allowing players to create weapons that suit their play style, with everything from damage and status effects to ammo capacity open to tinkering. Existing weapons blueprints will be scattered around the world for players to find, but it'll be far more rewarding to create your own, and upgrade circuits can be found to increase the damage of all weapon parts. If you want to try the system out for yourself, it can be found at **www.deadspace.com/weaponsbuilder**

STEP THREE UPPER ADAPTORS

▶ THESE ARE effectively barrels that influence how the output from the upper tool behaves. Want that electric blaster to hit multiple targets or send out waves of fire instead of a stream? Add a Diffraction Torus or a Directed Ejection Field and you're good to go.

PRECISION ADAPTOR: Focuses effect or projectile for increased accuracy and lethality
COMPRESSOR: Compresses effect or projectile into a more compact, intense form
DIRECTED SUSPENSION FIELD: Enables kinetic suspension of effect or projectile
DIFFRACTION TORUS: Allows effect or projectile to spread around the point of impact
DIRECTED EJECTION FIELD: Fires effect or projectile in short, forceful impulses
RAIL ACCELERATOR: Accelerates effect or projectile at high speed with penetrating force



STEP FOUR TOP AND SIDE ATTACHMENTS

▶ THESE ATTACHMENTS provide supplemental effects that make your weapon more versatile in combat.

AMMO BOX: Automatically reloads after last shot
AMMO SUPPORT: Increases ammo efficiency for both the player and their partner
AMMO SWEEPER: Automatically picks up nearby ammo
DAMAGE SUPPORT: Increases your partner's damage across all weapons
FULL ZOOM SCOPE: Prototype military scope for advanced long-range aiming
MEDIC SUPPORT: Health packs consumed by self also heal partner
SAFETY GUARD: Prevents user from taking damage from his own weapons
SCOPE: Military scope for long-range aiming
ACID BATH: Coats projectiles in acid that does damage over time
ELECTRIC CHARGE: Electrifies projectiles to cause small amounts of voltaic damage
FLAME GLAZE: Adds continual fire damage to projectiles

STEP 5 LOWER TOOL AND LOWER ADAPTOR

▶ ALL WEAPONS in *Dead Space 3* have a secondary or alternate fire mode that you can fashion in exactly the same way as their primary mode.

Dead Space 3 is the final part of a personal journey for Isaac Clarke that has seen him transformed from frail scientist to begrudging but effective warrior.

"I THOUGHT THAT WHOLE SUCKING SEQUENCE WITH THE NEXUS WAS SO DISGUSTING BUT AWESOME"

by a hellish nightmare. None of the action stopped, with our partner, who could see none of this, forced to defend us from the Necromorphs, who had become shadowy human figures in our dark vision. As we ran towards the light, the world changed back to normal, but the entire encounter felt genuinely scary for us as Carver, while forcing Isaac to keep us alive and adding serious dynamic tension.

"We're proud of all the divergence that we've been able to create in the co-op space," says Fattouh. "I feel it's really innovative. We're not doing the 'buddy follow' stuff; we're not making it the same as the single-player experience. We're really putting in those divergent elements that are related to a narrative and are telling a story." While Carver appears in single-player, it's only in co-op that we follow his story as he discovers the fate of his family, giving fans a deeper insight into the *Dead Space* universe.



There's no denying that co-op provides greater narrative and gameplay opportunities in *Dead Space 3*, but is it truly as scary as single-player? "I think the experience people are going to have in co-op really depends on who they're playing with," Papoutsis admits. "It's kind of like going to a horror movie with a friend. If you're going with a friend who's really into it or with a friend who's just making jokes all the time, that'll change how it feels."

While it's hard to tell whether it'll be able to deliver that edge of fear long-term, co-op certainly adds another dimension to *Dead Space 3*'s other banner feature: battles against gigantic Necromorph bosses, like the terrifying Nexus. It attacks players accompanied by swarms of aggressive Feeders, clawing at Clarke and Carver with its limbs and sucking them, kicking and screaming, towards its gaping maw. In co-op against the Nexus, one player can handle crowd control, hitting Feeders with powers like Stasis and area effect weapons, while the other hammers away at the beast. "The approach the design team takes," explains Papoutsis, "is to ask, 'How do we make sure that players are utilising all these things we have in a fun way that's not frustrating, allows them to feel empowered as they're defeating enemies, but still maintains a level of challenge that keeps people fully immersed?'"

But that isn't the only way *Dead Space 3*'s new features are enriching boss encounters. "You do have the ability to craft very specific items at workbenches and you may need to craft something particular for a boss fight," hints Fattouh. "You might find a schematic of something needed for that encounter with that boss – that's the kind of thing we're going for with it." Just what those things might be the team isn't divulging yet, but it's clear they're proud of *Dead Space 3*'s gruesome boss monsters. "I thought that whole sucking sequence with the Nexus was so disgusting but awesome," Fattouh laughs, teasing that it's just a taste of what we can expect.

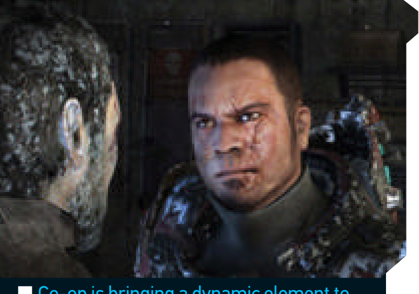
It's never easy to embrace change. It can be both frightening and jarring, but it's arguably the only way genres grow. While we don't quite know yet whether all *Dead Space 3*'s polished but disparate horror and action elements will come together, the potential is there, and Papoutsis, while refusing to pigeonhole *Dead Space 3* in the survival horror genre, promises its core themes still reflect that. "It's not about being a shooter, an action game or a horror game," he says. "The fact that you're trying to survive throughout the game, that makes it a survival horror game. There's a theme of survival throughout every game."

Playing *Dead Space 3*, it's hard to argue with that sentiment, and while we're a little fearful of the final outcome, there's a real thrill in the prospect of *Dead Space 3* broadening the scope and reach of survival horror. Given that this is a *Dead Space* game, that's probably a fitting emotional mix.

IN TWO MINDS

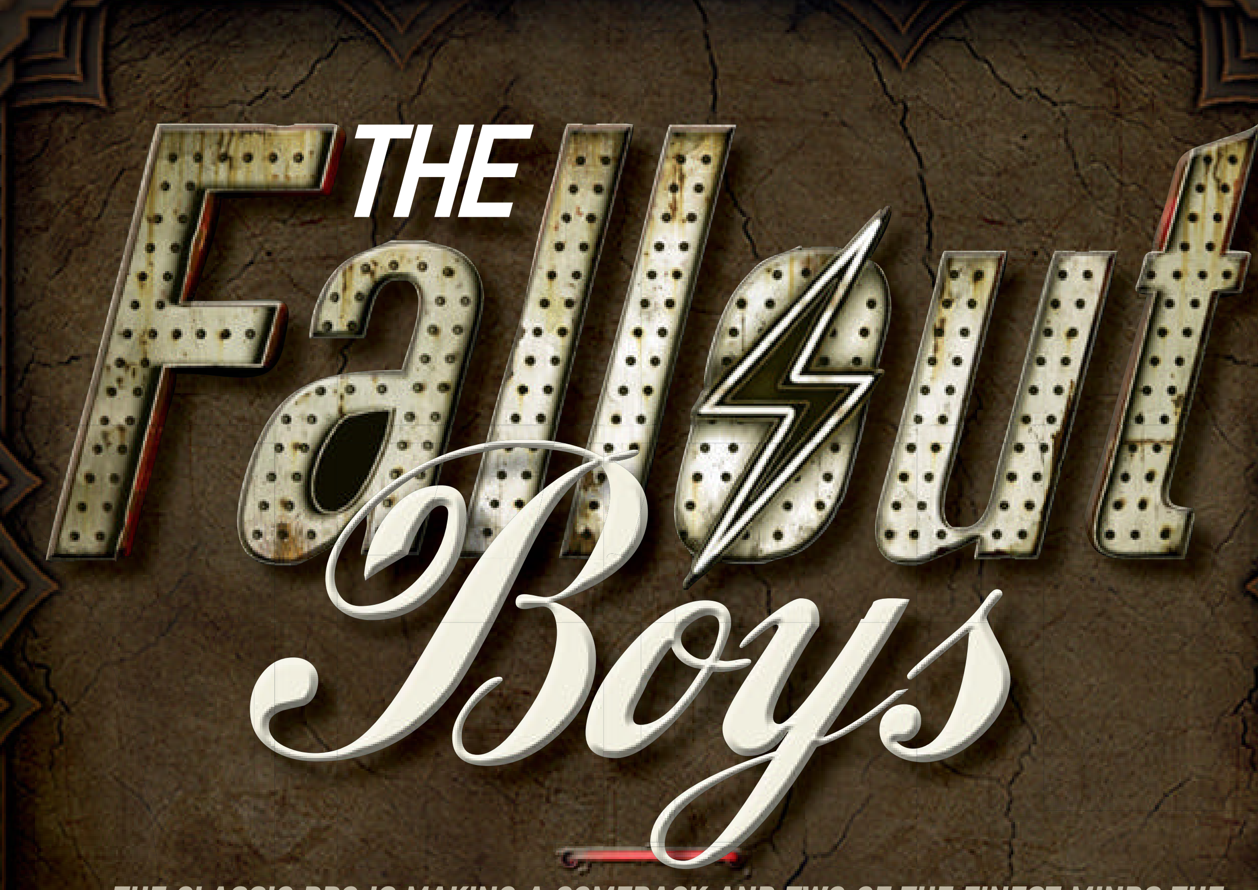
WHILE ISAAC has always been the face of the *Dead Space* franchise, for *Dead Space 3* Visceral wanted to introduce a second character and have him be a foil for Isaac in both the gameplay and narrative sense, and settled on gruff military man John Carver as the perfect choice.

"Carver is a soldier," explains Fattouh, "so he has a more obviously military mindset. Early in the game you're looking for Ellie, your girlfriend from *Dead Space 2*, and it's something that Carver is not particularly concerned with. He's driving Isaac forward on the mission and trying to keep him on track, but as the game progresses he begins to experience some dementia and gains a more human component. They start slightly at odds while working together to survive, but start to see where the other is coming from, and their motivations change and evolve as we progress, which makes for a cool story arc."



Co-op is bringing a dynamic element to *Dead Space* as players change tactics to battle Necromorphs in tandem.





THE CLASSIC RPG IS MAKING A COMEBACK AND TWO OF THE FINEST MINDS THE GENRE HAS EVER KNOWN ARE LEADING THE CHARGE. GAMES™ TALKS TO FALLOUT CREATORS CHRIS AVELLONE AND BRIAN FARGO ABOUT THEIR UPCOMING TITLES, AND THE REBIRTH OF A GENRE THAT HAD LONG SINCE DIED

Everyone loves an underdog, and when it comes to the games industry there are few developers as deserving of the term as Obsidian Entertainment. As a studio known for working primarily with existing IP, Obsidian has long been a talented set of developers hidden behind a veil of semi-anonymity. Few seem to realise that popular names like *Star Wars: Knights Of The Old Republic*, *Fallout* and *Neverwinter Nights* have been moulded and improved by the developer, and even its lone wholly original title, *Alpha Protocol*, was a handful of flaws short of greatness. Hamstrung by budget constraints and given little room for creative exploration, surely the talent at Obsidian must be frustrated at having so many limits placed on them, and what could they do if those barriers were suddenly removed?

"Everyone here wants the freedom to create a game of our own," states Chris Avellone, veteran developer and creative director at Obsidian. "While we've worked with franchises in the past and we enjoy doing so, it's not due to the fact that we've never had an original idea of our own." For all its eagerness to really let loose on a game all its own, Obsidian has never been afforded the freedom it desires to really see its dreams come to fruition.

Enter Kickstarter.

It was all thanks to Double Fine, really. Pitching a collaboration between the two greatest names in point-and-click adventure games was a sure-fire success, but no one could have predicted the effect it would have on the industry. Thanks to the sudden popularity it brought to Kickstarter, Double Fine's adventure directly raised the profile of Brian Fargo's *Wasteland 2*, and even boosted the success of previously unknown strategy RPG *The Banner Saga* thanks to the increased visibility of Kickstarter. As crowdfunding seemingly became a more and more viable alternative to the publisher-led nature of videogame development, others utilised Kickstarter's increased popularity to make their dreams possible: *Shadowrun Returns*, *Grim Dawn*, *Dead State* and *Star Command* are just some of the games that have since achieved otherwise impossible goals. Interestingly, they all have the same thing in common: they each counted 'classic' role-playing games as a reason to get excited. And now there's *Project Eternity*, the old-school RPG from Chris Avellone and his team at Obsidian, inspired by the games of the Infinity Engine.

CHRIS AVELLONE

BRIAN FARGO

"Kickstarter allowed us to re-evaluate the traditional game-building process by going directly to the fans," says Avellone, a sentiment that so many Kickstarter projects seem to share. "It's been great for morale, and everyone here has been excited about the process. Not just fan reaction, but the ability to interface directly with the fans much earlier in the process, and more freedom than we're used to."

It was clear from the start that *Project Eternity* intended to tap into a market that had long since died, too. "Double Fine and *Wasteland 2* were big motivators [to create a

WASTELAND 2

■ inXile has been sitting on the rights to *Wasteland* since 2003, and the long-awaited Kickstarter-funded sequel is now set for release late next year

Kickstarter campaign]," Avellone tells us. "*Wasteland 2* was especially appropriate because it was an old-school RPG, and the amount that it raised clearly showed that players wanted another game like that."

But is it as simple as that? Well, it must be. Project Eternity's pitch went on to raise over $4 million between Kickstarter and independent donations, smashing its already lofty goal of $1.1 million and nudging Double Fine's adventure off the top spot as the most-funded videogame on Kickstarter. Brian Fargo, developer of *Wasteland 2* and fellow Kickstarter success story, has alternative thoughts on why nostalgia is so important.

"The main thing these games are doing is filling the holes left in the market due to the way the business has evolved," says Fargo, praising crowdfunding's ability to get those fans involved at the very start. "Many of these experiences that people want came from the classics they grew up with. Oftentimes you end up with a group of people who want a certain type of game and a bunch of developers who want to make that game, yet you could not connect. Almost all the most successful products filled some kind of need, even if they were not based on a classic."

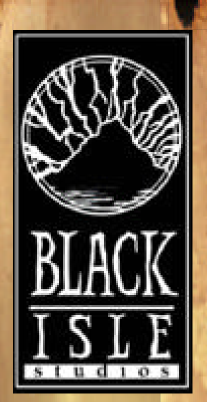
Project Eternity's success came not from the very well-executed pitch, nor the outpouring of support it received from media outlets, but the team behind it. Obsidian is comprised largely of former Black Isle developers, and can tout *Baldur's Gate*, *Icewind Dale* and *Planescape: Torment* as some of the PC favourites that its staff have worked on. It was this history that *Project Eternity* relied on. "It's possible it's because the 'classic' ones help provide a reference point by their nature," states Avellone. "For example, I have a good idea of what a Tim Schafer game is going to be. People are familiar with the Infinity Engine games – or at least our backers are – and they know what kind of IE games we've done. When you have that history and context to draw on, that makes your position stronger and makes players more willing to back you."

And since *Project Eternity* is so reliant on the past, it's important that Obsidian keeps what it believes to be the strengths of those classic Infinity Engine games at the core of this modern RPG. "A large part of the appeal of Infinity Engine games was the world," says Avellone, who then explains that *Project Eternity* shares similar strengths. "The world stands just as strongly as *Planescape* and *Forgotten Realms*, in our opinion. The fact that the world is crafted so intimately around the game mechanics is an added strength as well."

There's no denying we're on the cusp of a renaissance for the classic RPG genre, but without an existing IP and the lore that surrounds it there's only so much we can expect. What exactly does the 'classic' denote? Surely it's more than just the depth of its world? The answer is simple for Fargo: "Ultimately, the thing that makes almost every great game is a strong sense of cause and effect almost no matter what the genre. It could be great physics in a game, destructible items or a narrative like ours. The classic RPGs had a wonderful and deep cause and effect that people could feel, and that is a timeless element."

Timeless. That's probably the best word to really describe what makes these RPGs so classic, since it really encapsulates

"The fact that the world is crafted so intimately around the game mechanics is an added strength"



A storm brewing over the Black Isle?

BACK IN August, Interplay dropped an announcement that would have had all classic RPG fans giddy with excitement. "Black Isle Studios is back," claimed the official reveal. Cast aside those dreams of *Baldur's Gate III*, however, because not everything is what it seems. Avellone and Fargo both denied any involvement with this revival, with Avellone sardonically noting in an episode of Penny Arcade's *CheckPoint* that the majority of ex-Black Isle employees are currently working at Obsidian – so, really, this isn't Black Isle at all.

Speculation then went on to suggest that Beamdog, the company handling the development of *Baldur's Gate: Enhanced Edition*, could be involved, but founder Trent Oster, another former Black Isle employee, claimed he knew nothing about Interplay's new studio. All we know is that there are two former Black Isle staff that are working at this new company: Mark O'Green and Chris Taylor. Strangely, neither has provided comment about the reborn Black Isle, meaning the rest of the world is none the wiser. All we have to go on until Interplay makes its first move is the official website's creed: "Our goal has always been to make the world's best RPGs."



the nature of the genre, like a machine of many well-oiled parts, working together in harmony. It's something Avellone understands very well. "There are plenty of players who enjoyed the Infinity Engine games," he says. "They just don't have much room in today's market, nor could they guarantee enough of a return to interest publishers."

Any successful modern attempt at the genre needs to focus on these multitude of classic RPG elements to bring in the masses, and to re-create what made the originals so timeless in the first place. "In terms of things that were appealing to gamers," Avellone continues, "the party-based mechanics are one. The idea of being able to tactically position a small group of adventurers to explore a dungeon or tackle a threat or outmanoeuvre a rival group of adventurers is cool. The idea of being able to customise your portraits is cool. Writing your own bio. Finding inventory items that have stories attached. All of this and more may seem like tiny marks in the RPG landscape, but they're things that people loved and want to play again."

This is obviously all part of a wider argument about the sepia-toned trap of relying on nostalgia just that bit too much. "I don't see how nostalgia would affect sales or expectations in any way unless the designers relied too much on it," claims Fargo, who believes that as long as you focus on the right elements then "it will still be a robust experience".

Fargo continues his theory into the wider world of entertainment: "I remember watching *Toy Story* and appreciating all the inside jokes or old toy references, yet the little ones had no idea and didn't care. It is important to understand your audience at all levels."

It is, after all, the audience that is the most important part of any game, and doubly so for a crowdfunded project. Was it this reverence of the fans that helped *Project Eternity* reach such lofty heights, then? Avellone believes so, stating that it is Obsidian's "history with well-received Infinity Engine games in the past" combined with "other famed RPG favourites like *Fallout* and *Arcanum*" and the senior staff that go along with them, such as Tim Cain and Josh Sawyer, that really helped *Project Eternity* stand out. And what does Fargo make of *Project Eternity*'s pitch? "Their entire campaign was perfectly executed in terms of the amount of content they released to the public and how they could blanket the press with so many strong voices. I was a bit overwhelmed with the press demands on *Wasteland 2*, so I was jealous to see how many more people they had to respond. But the game was right in their wheelhouse and they have excellent credibility."

So if Kickstarter – and crowdfunding as a whole – has given rebirth to a loved genre, what does that mean for the future of classic RPGs? Will they become permanent fixtures in our

GRIM DAWN
■ This dark action-RPG, being developed by some of the folks behind *Titan Quest*, raised $537,515 on Kickstarter, smashing its $280,000 goal.

SHADOWRUN RETURNS
■ After an ill-advised FPS revival in 2007 left the franchise's future in doubt, creator of the tabletop game Jordan Weisman reacquired the rights from Microsoft and raised $1.8 million in funding on Kickstarter for a more faithful adaptation.

Shaking It Up

Brenda Brathwaite of *Wizardry* fame, *Doom* co-creator Tom Hall and their development studio, Loot Drop, began a Kickstarter campaign in early October, but the ill-fated project was scrapped halfway through the funding phase. With two weeks left, *Shaker* had only $250,000 – a quarter of its total funding goal. The decision to can the project was made by Loot Drop, however, which did not deem *Shaker* to have the potential to succeed. There are a number of reasons why Shaker didn't quite make it, the $4 million haul of *Project Eternity* likely a large part of it. Where Obsidian had a bevy of details for fans to filter through, *Shaker* was a confused mix of story and lore updates and very little in the way of gameplay. No one knew what it was or would be and, as Fargo says, the crowd won't spend its money if you're not clear from the start.



PROJECT ETERNITY
■ One of the biggest crowdfunding success stories so far, *Project Eternity*'s $4 million in pledges shows the clout of the names behind it. Now the wait until 2014 begins.

gaming lives, providing we're willing to pay up front for the luxury of choice?

"I think it is quite obvious that the classic RPG is back for good," states Fargo wholeheartedly. "When I travelled the world I was always asked about creating another RPG, but unfortunately I had retailers and publishers standing in the way. These barriers have been moved aside so that the players can decide what they want instead of a third-party who thinks [they know] what might work. It's beautiful."

> "When I travelled the world I was always asked about creating another RPG but I had retailers and publishers in the way"

While it's easy to become absorbed in the ideology of crowdfunding, it's impossible to overlook the concerns. There have and will continue to be crowdfunded projects that try to take advantage of the devoted gamers and genre fans who still want to play games that aren't just another flavour-of-the-month first-person shooter. Last month old-school turn-based strategy game *Haunts* was shelved due to its programmers leaving the project, causing concern for its pledgers over the lack of an end result. There is risk, of course; no one can refute that. Yet crowdfunding has a staunch community: within days of the news that *Haunts* may not see the light of day, developer Rick Dakan announced that he had "a ton of emails, including many great offers to help finish *Haunts*, and they keep coming in".

It's something that Fargo understands very well. "I think the market tends to do a fine job of taking care of itself in terms of when someone is asking too much or trying to get funding too soon. If they don't like the concept or think the money isn't right, you will not [get funded]. The 'crowd' is a smart bunch. I am hopeful that this is my business model going forward, as it goes beyond the money. It gets a passionate group of people invested at every level and creates a healthy dialogue that is far better than anything previously."

So if the classic RPG really is here to stay, what of the future? What can we expect not only from the projects being worked on today, but for the future modern classics that we've yet to bear witness to? Avellone believes that, first and foremost, developers of classic RPGs need to learn to adapt, to understand that game development has evolved and not everything about these old-school games should be deemed classic and worthy of preservation.

"Recognising what design decisions from yesteryear may not be appropriate to resurrect [is important]. For example, in neither *Wasteland 2* nor *Eternity* are you going to be randomly rolling stats for your character. Building your character via point allocation has largely replaced the 'random' process because it allows for better role-playing and crafting the type of character you want to play."

This will tie in to *Project Eternity*'s combat system too, which will depend much less on the randomness of dice rolls. "The idea of random dice rolls affecting skill successes is something we've debated over the years," Avellone tells us, "and it's something that we made a transition from in the early *Fallout* games. If someone has invested 100 per cent into speech, and a random roll determines the likelihood of a major speech event happening, that doesn't always lend itself to a positive investment-reward loop."

That being said, Avellone doesn't agree that everything in modern gaming is worth including, especially when it comes to classic RPGs. "I feel that too much weight has gone into

Hitting The Jackpot

Having raised over $4 million, how did Obsidian Entertainment build enough hype to turn Project Eternity into the most-funded game on Kickstarter?



$0
A teaser website lasting for four days built hype ahead of the Kickstarter project going live. Regular updates to the website's source code kept people interested.

$1.1 million
In less than 24 hours, *Project Eternity* reaches its funding goal of $1.1 million by touting big name developers and the classic RPGs that they worked on.

$1.3 million
The obligatory stretch goals provide extra targets for those who haven't already pledged with the promise of additional content.

$1.5 million
Details around how the game will play encourage additional pledges from the wary, or provide incentive for others to increase their pledges.

$1.6 million
Add-ons are included, letting people add to their pledges to buy additional extras like mouse mats and T-shirts.

$1.9 million
Regular video updates from Tim Cain, Adam Brennecke and Josh Sawyer give an identity to Obsidian, as well as provide necessary details on *Project Eternity*.

$2.2 million
The 'Mega Dungeon' is announced, a special dungeon that has new levels added every 5,000 backers or 2,500 Likes on Facebook.

$2.5 million
Brian Fargo helps out with Project Eternity. A new reward tier is created enabling pledgers to get a copy of *Wasteland 2* alongside *Project Eternity*.

$2.6 million
Alongside two new huge stretch goals of $3 million and $3.5 million, the first screenshot is released, practically confirming the game will be a modern day equivalent of *Baldur's Gate*.

$3.2 million
Constant video updates, more add-ons and reward tiers, and entertaining updates such as a livestream of Adam Brennecke playing *Icewind Dale II* keep *Project Eternity* in people's minds.

$3.5 million
In the final push, a livestream of the celebration party at Obsidian's studios keeps fan participation high, boosting existing pledges even more to reach a total of $3,986,929 on Kickstarter alone.

TOTAL BACKERS 73,986

cinematics and voice-acting for the player over the years," he says. "While I don't disagree that the end goal is a good one, I don't feel that setting a character with a specific voice, nor placing him in special case cinematic branching options, is necessarily the best way to handle dialogue in games. It can make for a better game, but not necessarily a better role-playing game."

Avellone believes that classic RPGs really need to emphasise this simplistic, minimalist approach: "As a recent example,* The Artist *was a movie that I thought drove home the fact that there's a lot of bells and whistles you can strip away from a narrative, including sound, that can enhance a story. I still cite it as an example of how a minimalist approach can yield better results than many summer blockbusters."

There's always room for innovation, as there should be in any genre, but Fargo's approach is the opposite of Avellone's. As important as written dialogue will be in *Wasteland 2*, Fargo admits there are ways to innovate even in a genre rooted in old-school mechanics. "For me, the audio element is a big one and one that I intend to push in some directions that RPGs have not really done before," he tells us. "I'll leave it at that for now, but it is a big part of what excites me. Most of the other innovations are along the lines of what is state of the art, which encapsulates modifiable UI, allowing for modders, customised portraits, user-controlled camera angles and the like."

The future is undoubtedly bright for the classic RPG, then, and while these modern classics may not take the traditional route to market that we've come to expect, it's clear there's more potential for the genre than ever before. Happy to bang the drum just that little bit longer, Fargo leaves us with his final thoughts on innovation, expanding far beyond the scope of the classic RPG: "The biggest development innovation is the use of the crowd to help shape the game and to acquire the more generic assets. This is the biggest dynamic change from years past."

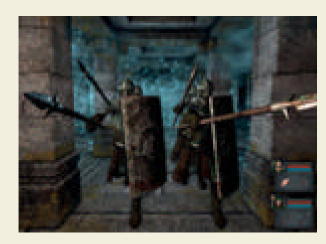


DEAD STATE
■ Zombies are in everything, so it's only natural for them to be in Kickstarter-funded RPGs as well. This turn-based effort, coming from Brian Mitsoda (*Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines*, *Alpha Protocol*), managed $332,635.



Why Wait When You Can Have?

Wasteland 2 won't be here until next year. Shadowrun Returns is a while off. Project Eternity? That's 2014, unfortunately. But there are still plenty of modern classics knocking around. You just need to know where to look...

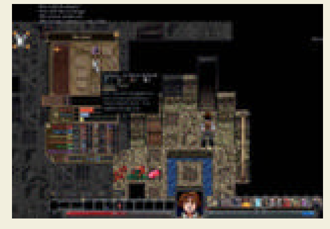


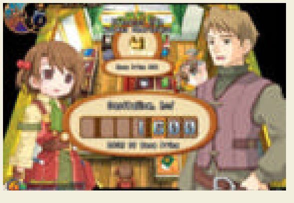
Legend Of Grimrock

MIMICKING THE most classic of RPGs, *Legend Of Grimrock* was afforded a mild taste of success earlier this year when it was released. Covered across a wide range of gaming outlets, *Grimrock* proves there's just as much opportunity for something *old* as there is something tried-and-tested, helped only by the fact that its modern design opens even greater levels of depth.

Dungeons Of Dredmor

'ROGUELIKE' IS a term thrown around far too often these days, but few games are as deserving as *Dungeons Of Dredmor*. It was released in 2011 – though you wouldn't know it to look at it – and hides an exceptional amount of depth. There's not much more to it than that, however, which is often the unfortunate curse when targeting a 'nostalgic' audience.





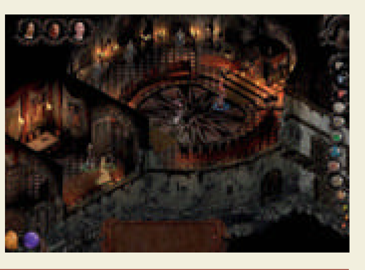
Recettear: An Item Shop's Tale

THERE'S NO reason why Japanese RPGs can't be considered classics, something *Recettear* proves ably. Much of the game harks back to the classic RPGs of the Nineties, but with a pinch of *Harvest Moon*. Here you're looking to bolster your store, improve your abilities as a salesman and, as expected, battle a number of beasties.



Inquistor

THIS IS a little-known RPG very recently released, but is perhaps the most 'classic' example on this list. With an isometric camera, 2D sprites and grid-based movement, this is about as retro as they come. It doesn't need the sheen of *Legends Of Grimrock* to stand out, however: as with all RPGs, it's the gameplay that counts and few can compete on that front.





XCOM: Enemy Unknown

FOR SOME reason, including this one feels a bit like cheating, but this reboot of a PC favourite is just as classic as the *X-COM* games of old. Sure, Firaxis has done a bang-up job of modernising the series, but with elements like permadeath, deep combat strategy and party control, it's hard not to see how classic the latest *XCOM* really is.

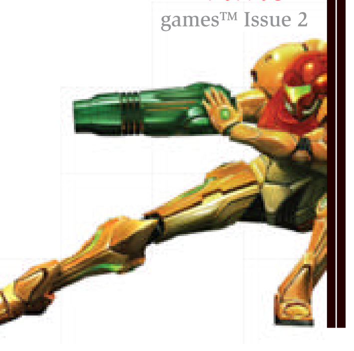

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THE PERFECT 12
As games™ celebrates ten years of telling it like it is, it makes perfect sense that we'd give ourselves a pat on the back and indulge in a spot of navel-gazing. Only a dozen games have ever scored 10/10, so we talk to the developers responsible and the reviewers that awarded the perfect scores to see if those few titles still hold up today…
GEARS OF WAR
LITTLEBIGPLANET 2
FALLOUT 3
GOD OF WAR 2
MASS EFFECT 2
DEMON'S SOULS
GRAND THEFT AUTO IV
DEAD SPACE 2
BURNOUT 3: TAKEDOWN
BIOSHOCK
METROID PRIME
SUPER MARIO GALAXY 2

1. METROID PRIME

FORMAT: **GameCube**
DEVELOPER: **Retro Studios**
PUBLISHER: **Nintendo**
YEAR: **2002**

"Everything you remember about Super Metroid being wonderful is present and correct in Metroid Prime"
games™ Issue 2



EVERY TIME a game scores 10/10 in games™, it provokes heated debate and careful discussion. It's not a decision to be taken lightly, and this was one of the most hotly debated scores in the magazine's history. Only one month after launching **games™**, with its hardline attitudes and '5/10 equals average' review score policy, along came *Metroid Prime*. Oh…

This was a game so polished, innovative and so damn good that it demanded nothing less than a 10/10 review. Fears were high internally that if it got that score it would make **games™** look soft and undo all of the hard work of the first issue to establish the magazine as something different to the majority of the gaming press. In hindsight, we like to think that it did the opposite, proving just how much we love games and how willing the magazine is to stick its neck out when an instant classic comes along.

For Mark Pacini, producer on *Metroid Prime* at the then-unproven Retro Studios, the meaning of the score was so much more personal. "I think the biggest thing the '10' score brought to me at that time was vindication," he tells us. "Leading up to the first E3 before *Prime* was playable, the general consensus was that we were going to fail, and fail hard, at bringing *Metroid* to 3D. Retro was regularly bombarded with negative press, emails and threats about Nintendo's decision to give *Metroid* to a Western developer. Never mind the fact that the game was in first-person and not a side-scroller. We had this insurmountable task of exceeding everyone's expectations, even though most fans had no faith that we would even come close.

"But, what kept us going was that we had an unbelievable team. A team of incredible artists, engineers, designers – most of whom were super fans of *Metroid*. On top of that, we were working side by side with some of the best Japanese game developers in the world. This group of people 'willed' this game to happen amidst all the adversity and negativity. We knew we were making something good, but we had no idea if fans and gamers would respond to it, so we just put our heads down and kept going in the direction we felt was right.

"The overall attitude towards *Metroid Prime* took a drastic 180 at the 2002 E3 show. People were finally able to play it on the show floor, and the response was overwhelming. In one day, the outlook of the game went from, 'This is going to be crap!' to, 'Holy crap!' After the game's release, we were unbelievably fortunate to receive many positive reviews and awards for our efforts. While getting a perfect score is completely subjective, it means a great deal to the developer, whether they want to admit it or not. So thanks!"

"WHILE GETTING A PERFECT SCORE IS COMPLETELY SUBJECTIVE, IT MEANS A GREAT DEAL TO THE DEVELOPER"



Is it an FPS or an adventure? Who cares when it's this good?

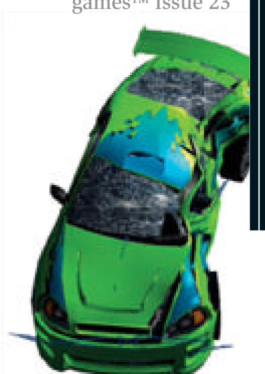


Prime's scanning feature and multiple visors allowed it to keep the older games' exploration elements.

2. BURNOUT 3: TAKEDOWN

FORMAT: **PS2, Xbox**
DEVELOPER: **Criterion**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
YEAR: **2004**

"Nothing else with four wheels can match its pace, ferocity and skill or provide nearly as much excitement, satisfaction or immersion"
games™ Issue 23



If anyone can appreciate the great deliberation that goes into reviewing the world's best games, it's someone who's worked on both sides of the games review fence. Paul Glancey has done just that. Having worked on *Zzap!64* and *Computer & Video Games* magazines in the Eighties and Nineties respectively, Glancey later made the move into game development and soon found himself in the position of senior producer on what would later become **games™**'s second 10/10 game, *Burnout 3: Takedown*.

"*Burnout* and *Burnout 2: Point Of Impact* were fan favourites and put Criterion on the map, so maybe *Burnout 3* could have got away with being just another iteration; different cars, new tracks, a new front end, maybe with online play being the one big new feature," he tells **games™**. "If we'd just done that well, maybe we could have got a solid 8/10 game. But Criterion always pushes for more. We bumped up the speed and the traffic, which had been the two cores of *Burnout* gameplay to that point, and put a lot more into the collisions that had become a focus in *Burnout 2*. With the work that was going into making crashes more spectacular, to then add aggressive driving, takedowns, crash aftertouch, Road Rage and the full-on Crash mode just seemed like the logical progression – it HAD to be done."

"LIVING UP TO EXPECTATIONS IS GOOD, BUT IT'S EVEN BETTER TO OVER-DELIVER WHEREVER YOU CAN"

An incredible achievement, *Burnout 3: Takedown* pushed the humble arcade racer further than anyone could have imagined at the time, its crash mechanics injecting risk/reward tactics, visceral action and gobsmacking spectacle where once there was just the objective of crossing the finish line first. It felt like the racing genre had been defined all over again. And now, nearly a decade later, its blueprint remains the one developers look to more than any other, whether it be in *Split/Second: Velocity*, *Ridge Racer Unbounded* or Criterion's latest ambitious assault on the senses, its wonderful reboot of *Need For Speed: Most Wanted*.

"When the game shipped, I think most reviewers and the players were expecting just another iteration, so when they discovered it was about twice the game they had anticipated it blew their minds a little bit," Glancey concludes. "It taught me that living up to expectations is good, but it's even better to over-deliver wherever you can. We were fortunate that we had a great team that could do that, and seeing their efforts appreciated and rewarded like they were in **games™**, and among the players, made all the late nights worthwhile. I don't think any of us imagined that we'd be among the 'perfect 12', though – so thanks, **games™**!"

3. GEARS OF WAR

At the time, this seemed a controversial recipient of a 10, but in retrospect very few games have cast such a long shadow," says original reviewer Matt Handrahan. And it's impossible to understate just how much that statement rings true. Yes, *Gears Of War* had its own influences – most notably the admittedly clumsy cover mechanic of Namco's *Kill Switch* but, more pertinently, the tightly wound action of *Resident Evil 4*. Yet it was *Gears* that brought these sensibilities together in a complete package that finally made cover shooting work while also wrapping it in a sensibility that perhaps only Cliff Bleszinski could have pulled off at the time, the eternally youthful designer calling on both the Japanese arcade style of gameplay as well as the Western PC deathmatch template as his core influences to create a universally appealing game.

Just six years on, *Gears Of War*'s importance to the evolution of the medium is lost somewhat to the sands of time. Like *Space Invaders* or the original *Super Mario Bros*, it may eventually seem less accomplished to new generations than historians would have them believe, but you only have to look at how many other action games have followed in Epic's footsteps. The brilliant *Uncharted* series would not be the same were it not for *Gears*, while Capcom has ironically floundered with its latest *Resident Evil* games, trying to bring the influence full circle but failing to divine the alchemy of the perfect cover system within its own framework.

"*Gears Of War* was the most distinctive addition to the shooter canon since the launch of *Halo*, and the only new IP of this generation to establish an enduring online community," Handrahan continues. "Evidence of its lasting influence can be seen in dozens of games, and while its sequels were bigger and more badass, they weren't necessarily better – Epic's weighty, cover-based gameplay is at its best in the first game's tight, claustrophobic levels."

"Every review we get is important, and every score we take very seriously," says Epic's Jim Brown, who was lead level designer on the first *Gears*. "Receiving a 10/10 is even more significant, however, as it means that we not only met but exceeded our players' expectations – and that's exactly why we do what we do every day. There is no better compliment a developer can receive.

"I can only hope that the reason *Gears Of War* fared so well was because our personal stories came through in the game. Each of those characters meant something to us, and every decision was debated and implemented with a passion and drive that really brought the studio together in fantastic ways. *Gears Of War* was definitely a personal win for us as a team."

Gears Of War was one of the generation's 'wow' moments – a time when it became clear that this couldn't be done on older hardware.

FORMAT: **PC, Xbox 360**
DEVELOPER: **Epic Games**
PUBLISHER: **Microsoft**
YEAR: **2006**

"In the hands of two skilled practitioners, the cover system is so satisfying it attains a kind of beauty"
games™ Issue 51





4. GOD OF WAR II

FORMAT: **PS2**
DEVELOPER: **Sony Santa Monica**
PUBLISHER: **Sony** YEAR: **2007**

"This is a game that keeps on giving, an astonishingly evocative, unstoppably alluring voyage through myth and majesty"
games™ Issue 55

Just four short months after *Gears Of War*'s chainsaws carved a new template for the shooter genre, another thing-of-war came along and challenged everyone's expectations in a totally different way.

"*God Of War II* arrived right at the end of the PS2's life cycle, and I remember being blown away that a game on ageing technology had the scale and scope to outshine almost anything on the newer, shinier machines," says Jon Denton on his sole **games™** 10. "It was a rare review, because I constantly expected the game to drop its standards, to eventually slip, much like the original had, but it never did thanks to a dizzying combination of combat, ambition and awe that genuinely raised the bar for the genre."

"David Jaffe had moved on and many doubted whether we would be able to make a *God Of War* without him," says producer Ariel Lawrence. "As a team we wanted a game double in size, with more AI, a longer story, new mechanics, more bosses. We wanted what the fans wanted. The only problem was we had to ship with a production cycle half as short as the original. We also found that we wouldn't be moving to PS3. This was good in that we could keep most of our pipeline, but it also meant stepping up our art and technology to compete with Sony's own new hotness. The 10/10 score proved that the team never backs down from a challenge."

Gears may have impressed us above, but the other *GOW* showed that there was still life in the PS2.

5. BIOSHOCK

What *Gears Of War* is to action, *BioShock* is to narrative," says Matt Handrahan, the man who kindly made Irrational's shooter the fifth 10/10. "The ambient storytelling techniques employed by Irrational were so effective that they have become an intrinsic part of the language of game design, with an influence that reaches far beyond first-person shooters. But more than that, *BioShock* is a wonderfully realised experience, blending innovative gameplay, peerless art direction and memorable characters, all underpinned by an incisive critique of the ethics of virtual violence. *Call Of Duty* it ain't."

Intelligent shooters had existed before, of course, even if we did forget to review one of them, but in *BioShock* the form reached its zenith with a refreshingly original setting, unconventional character choices and narrative techniques that both rewrote the rulebook and made knowing comment about the state of videogame design up until that point. As a magazine desperate to see story-based games evolve, we couldn't not make everyone stand up and take notice of *BioShock*.

Its greatness was that Irrational injected story into the very fabric of its game, rather than labouring the point with dialogue and cut-scenes, a fact about which Ken Levine remains proud. "I think people responded to the world," he tells us during the final weeks of polish on *BioShock Infinite*. "We put a lot of effort into making Rapture a believable place, despite the fact that an Objectivist utopian underwater city does strain credibility. We love our worlds, so fleshing them is one of the joys of working on a *BioShock* game. In my head, it's a real place."

BioShock stands out from the legions of first-person shooters that have been released this generation by actually innovating

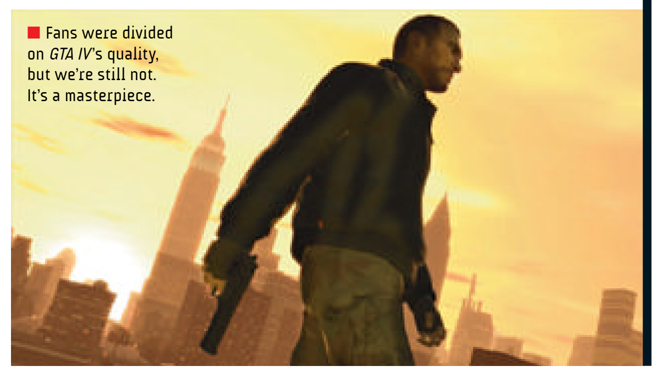
FORMAT: **PC, PS3, Xbox 360**
PUBLISHER: **2K Games**
DEVELOPER: **Irrational Games**
YEAR: **2007**

> *"BioShock is a complete vision. A full and consistent picture of a decayed society, where every character and every location seems completely organic and necessary to the world around it"*
> games™ Issue 61

6. GRAND THEFT AUTO IV

FORMAT: **PC, PS3, Xbox 360** DEVELOPER: **Rockstar North**
PUBLISHER: **Rockstar Games** YEAR: **2008**

> *"We would never have thought that by retreading the same patch of ground a studio could leave us feeling like we have just played one of the best videogames of all time"*
> games™ Issue 70



Fans were divided on *GTA IV*'s quality, but we're still not. It's a masterpiece.

If evidence were ever required of *Grand Theft Auto IV*'s ability to push boundaries on all fronts, not just in the size and scope of its setting but in its narrative ambitions and cinematic polish, then look no further than games™ issue 70. This may have been the sixth time a full 10/10 score was approvingly stamped onto the end of a review, but it was the first and only time that a **games™** review has totalled six pages, such was the wealth of content worth talking about.

We'd be lying if we said **games™** hadn't got a bit carried away with the excitement too. Though *Grand Theft Auto III* had defined open-world gaming in the PS2 era, its follow-ups had merely iterated on the formula and, by 2008, we were clamouring for a true evolution. *GTA IV* did not disappoint.

"Rockstar's decision to return to a familiar setting rather than invent a new one was the most brilliant of the many brilliant decisions behind *Grand Theft Auto IV*," says regular 10 dispenser Matt Handrahan. "Only by retreading old ground could Rockstar so clearly illustrate how far it had come since *GTA III*, and while some bemoaned the absence of jetpacks and fright wigs, the creation of a character as nuanced and thought-provoking as Niko Bellic is a greater achievement than those people would deign to recognise. *Grand Theft Auto IV* and its brilliant DLC set new standards in world-building – standards that have yet to be surpassed."

"THE CREATION OF A CHARACTER AS NUANCED AND THOUGHT-PROVOKING AS NIKO BELLIC IS A GREAT ACHIEVEMENT"

7. FALLOUT 3

FORMAT: **PC, PS3, Xbox 360**
DEVELOPER: **Bethesda Softworks**
PUBLISHER: **In-house**
YEAR: **2008**

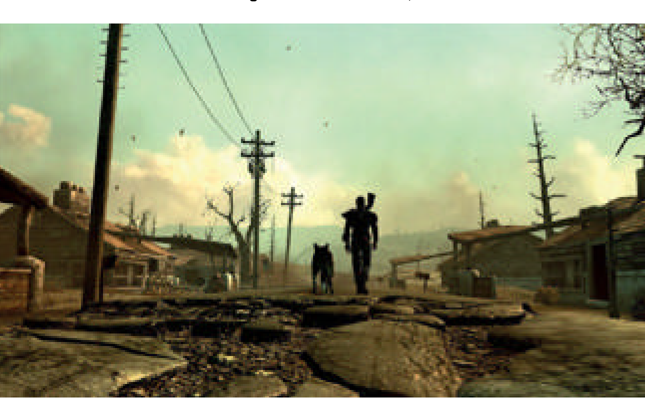
"The desperation is always there, and the easier, more despicable path that the rest of the world seems to have taken in such a dark time will always nag at you and attempt to draw you downward"
games™ Issue 77

After *Metroid Prime*, *Fallout 3* is another example of a classic revived as an FPS and working.

No matter how hard we try, all reviews are open to a degree of subjectivity. After all, if they weren't, we'd just get out our magical quality-measuring tool for each new game, and Metacritic would be pointless as every outlet would score each game identically based on some inherent, objective quality. Everyone has their own perspective, except, it seems, when it comes to *Fallout 3*. You'd struggle to find a more unanimous opinion held between the **games™** team, and that's reflected in the readership, who have voted the game the best of our 'perfect 12'.

The task of reviewing *Fallout 3* was ultimately the responsibility of one person, however: the magazine's long-serving editor in chief, Rick Porter. "It was an easy decision for me, really," he says. "In all my time reviewing games I don't think I've experienced that level of immersion – a level that I feel no game has matched to this day. I've worked on **games™** for a long time, and it's the only 10/10 I've ever awarded. It's certainly not a decision I took lightly but I stand by it to this day."

Immersion has been one of the watchwords of the HD generation and, not for the first time, a developer credits the success of their game to its ability to construct a believable sense of place. "I think the *Fallout* series is one of gaming's greatest worlds, and we were incredibly lucky to add a chapter to it," says Bethesda Softworks' Pete Hines. "We loved our time making *Fallout 3*, and hope others look back with similar thoughts on playing it. It's always surreal when years of your life are boiled down to a number, but it's nice when it's a 10."





The first Japanese-developed **games™** 10, and one of only two overall.



8. DEMON'S SOULS

Format: **PS3** Publisher: **Atlus/Namco Bandai** Developer: **From Software** Year: **2009**

"Never have we played a game that punishes so much while constantly providing a reason to keep pushing on and see what brilliance lies beyond the next hurdle"
games™ Issue 90

For a magazine that's often accused of a bias toward Japanese-developed titles, games™ has adorned surprisingly few of them with a 10/10 score in the past decade. In fact, it was seven years before the first one came along in the form of From Software's so-hard-it-hurts game-changer. Perhaps the trend can be attributed to a much-mooted, but never statistically proven, slump in Japan's ability to stay relevant during the HD generation – but that's a debate for another day. Whatever the cause, *Demon's Souls* was a break from the norm in just about every conceivable way.

In an era when almost every other game looked to attract a wider audience by either going for the casual crowd or creating an easy 'walk through my movie' experience, *Demon's Souls* revived the test of skill that is more closely associated with the 8-bit era, only wrapping



Dark Souls was arguably better, but you can't beat uncovering a surprise gem like Demon's Souls.

it in a deep evolution of dungeon-crawling RPGs and introducing new ideas like its online 'invasion' mechanics. A breath of fresh air that tapped straight into our hardcore gamer instincts, *Demon's Souls* was perhaps most surprising in the influence it had. Suddenly, hard but fair games were cool again, while its online functions were also picked up by other games as developers were reminded just how much untapped potential remains in the online space. And while unexpected sequel *Dark Souls* betters *Demon's Souls* in many ways – not least its contiguous open-world structure – even that game scaled its ambitions back from its forebear, doing away with the complicated way in which global player behaviour changed the world and aggressiveness of its inhabitants for every player.

"In the process of writing about videogames for a living, you can often spot a 10/10 game coming before it arrives," says *Demon's Souls* reviewer Ashley Day. "Hands-on time with preview code and word of mouth from respected peers contribute, but *Demon's Souls* was a game that really took the team by surprise. It arrived with little fanfare, from a developer of middling acclaim and was, at the time, only available as an import. Having played the game alone, away from the eyes of the office, it was tough to convince anyone else of its quality or importance, especially as its game design inherently prevented anyone from making a snap judgement. Thankfully, the team trusted my opinion and a glowing review was written, praising *Demon's Souls* for its innovation and refreshing mechanics. And time proved us right, as we watched the game go from underground sensation to its UK release and a sequel that nobody saw coming and was, in my opinion, even better. I'm extremely proud to have been able to shout about a game like *Demon's Souls*, and just as proud to have worked on a magazine with the balls to let me do that."

"DEMON'S SOULS REVIVED THE TEST OF SKILL THAT IS MORE CLOSELY ASSOCIATED WITH THE 8-BIT ERA"

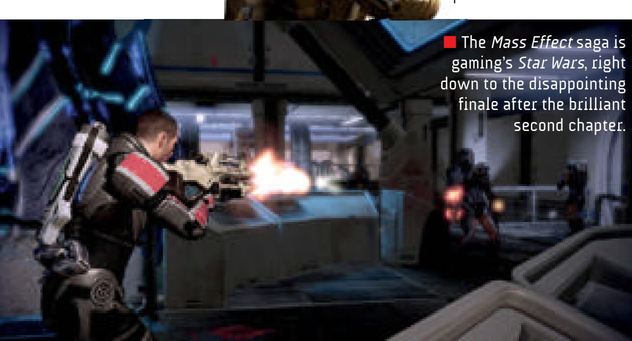
9. MASS EFFECT 2

FORMAT: **PC, PS3, Xbox 360** PUBLISHER: **EA** DEVELOPER: **BioWare** YEAR: **2010**

If there's one genre that grew more than any other alongside games™'s first ten years, it's the RPG. In 2002, the change was only just hinted at. *Final Fantasy X* had taken the old style of JRPG about as far as it could go – though it would take Square Enix years more to realise it – while the release of *Star Wars: Knights Of The Old Republic* was still about a year away from carving a new path for the genre to follow on consoles. By 2010, however, the RPG's fate had been sealed, evolving to become a kind of king of the genres, capable of wrapping all sorts of interactions into a cohesive, narrative-based whole. And this is something **games™** was happy to recognise, awarding a run of three 10s, all to RPGs, between 2008 and 2010. Each of those games did something crucially different with the genre, but for *Mass Effect 2* it was primarily the game's ability to drive cause-and-effect mechanics from one game to another – something that had certainly been done in the past, but nowhere near on this scale.

"If you need proof of *Mass Effect 2*'s 10-ness, just play *Mass Effect 3*," says reviewer Matt Handrahan. "This was the generation's most ambitious experiment at its most vital, the perfect point between the actions of the past and the possibilities of the future, when it seemed like an entire universe was at the mercy of your decisions. On the surface, *ME2* is an engaging third-person shooter; at its core, it is a thrilling expression of what makes videogames unique, blazing a trail that we can only hope other developers choose to follow."

"I think part of the charm of *Mass Effect 2* was that it had a unique combination of darkness and mystery as the second act in the *Mass Effect* trilogy," says Casey Hudson, BioWare's executive producer, hinting at the game's other great achievement: to successfully bridge an entire trilogy, each one more ambitious than the last. "I've been very lucky to work with an amazingly talented team," he continues when we ask how he felt about the 10/10. "After years of hard work on a game, it's a great relief to see our efforts rewarded with a perfect review score."



The *Mass Effect* saga is gaming's *Star Wars*, right down to the disappointing finale after the brilliant second chapter.

"In Mass Effect 2, the path from needing a better pistol to standing on a spacecraft teetering on the precipice of a yawning chasm is seamless, and the resulting sense of discovery is without peer"

games™ Issue 92



10. SUPER MARIO GALAXY 2

FORMAT: **Wii**
DEVELOPER: **Nintendo**
PUBLISHER: **Nintendo**
YEAR: **2010**

"This whole new universe of planets is the most inventive, exuberant and, yes, fun set of challenges and diversions yet seen in the platform game genre"
games™ Issue 97

Go back to the *Metroid Prime* review in issue 2 of games™ and you'll find a short passage that, in the interests of contextualising the score, name checks some other games that would have scored a 10/10 had the magazine existed at the time. The first name on the list, of course, is *Super Mario 64*. Obviously one of the best games ever made, it's also part of a clear lineage of titles that historically defined not just its own genre but videogames as an art form. Yet by the current generation, the mantle had begun to slide. *Mario* games were still indisputably the best in their genre but their importance to videogames as a whole… That's debatable. And then *Super Mario Galaxy* happened. A return to form, half a decade in the making, its spherical levels reinvented the platform genre while its unwavering commitment to unpretentious, pure gameplay stood out monolithically against its peers. *Super Mario Galaxy 2*, extraordinarily, managed to be even better, with a mind-boggling number of amazing levels, each one more original and inventive than the last.

"I think I procrastinated over the score to the original *Mario Galaxy* more than any other review in my career, teetering between a 9 and a 10. It was a tough call," says Ashley Day, who reviewed both *Galaxy* titles. "*Mario Galaxy 2*, by contrast, was the easiest call I've ever had to make. Having completed the game on a Wii debug console during the review stage, I got my hands on a US retail release just a few weeks later. Instead of the fatigue it's natural to feel after reviewing a big game, I was instead overjoyed to be reunited with it and immediately set about trying to get all 242 stars. If anything, I grew to love it even more. This is my definition of a 10/10 game. One you form an instant and permanent attachment to."



11. LITTLEBIGPLANET 2

FORMAT: **PS3** PUBLISHER: **Sony**
DEVELOPER: **Media Molecule** YEAR: **2011**

As games™ celebrates its tenth anniversary and moves from one hardware generation into another, it's impossible to predict what the next big trend in game design will be. But if this past couple of years is anything to by, it's the ability to put those designs in the hands of the players that will prove to be at least one of the most important features. *Minecraft*'s unending world of possibility, for example, makes it the most important game for the generation of players growing up today. It may very well prove to be their *Super Mario Bros*. But for **games™**, this movement really began with *LittleBigPlanet*. Not just the 'platform construction kit' that many labelled it, *LBP* is a special kind of software that, much like *Minecraft*, blurred the lines between playing and creating.

LBP wasn't quite the finished article, though. Aside from a few ingenious workarounds, it only allowed users to make more platform levels. But its superbly accomplished sequel allowed virtually any type of content to be made – including creations you might not even call games. It's a staggering achievement and one we feel Media Molecule will be comfortable to leave standing for years to come. While handheld variations have been added to the mix, it's unlikely that a *LittleBigPlanet 3* will be necessary soon, if ever. The 10/10 must therefore seem like an obvious call, but as *LBP2* reviewer Nick Jones reveals, there was a small amount of faith involved in the decision.

"It's challenging to review a game like *LittleBigPlanet 2* before the general public gets its hands on it, as so much of its success depends on their input, so, I'll admit, that 10/10 was a bit of a punt," reveals Jones. "But judging by the creativity shown by the community with the first game, the standard of the levels created during the beta, and the level of complexity of the tools, I was confident that it would, eventually, fulfil its promise. That community did not let me down.

"Although, *LBP2* did not have the impact that the original had, my score reflected the original's status as one of the standout games of this generation. I think that if *LittleBigPlanet* had been reviewed a few months after release, then that would have scored a ten too.

"I still play it regularly to see what amazing things the community has dreamt up and to just play around with the tools. Has it been superseded? No."

"There have been numerous experiments for in-game menu systems, single-player co-op games and turn-based RPG combat -- all of which are only possible with LittleBigPlanet 2's tools"
games™ Issue 105

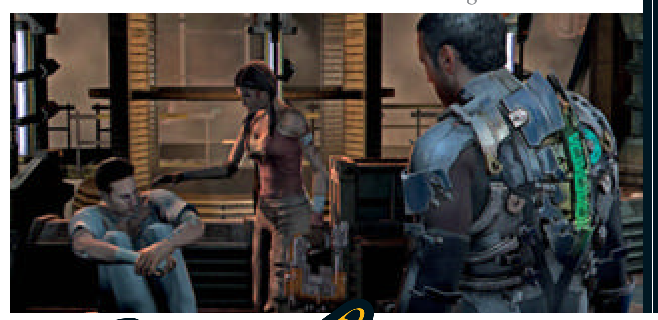


12. DEAD SPACE 2

FORMAT: **PC, PS3, Xbox 360** PUBLISHER: **EA** DEVELOPER: **Visceral** YEAR: **2011**

"The perfect sequel in terms of mechanical improvement and narrative progression, Dead Space 2 is genuinely one of the most gripping and constantly rewarding gaming experiences we've ever had"

games™ Issue 106



I think we all knew that *Dead Space 2* was going to be good – we just didn't really know how good," says Luke Albigés, the reigning champion in the Brave Enough To Give A Ten category. "As with *Resident Evil 4*'s change in direction, Visceral's action slant irked some and led them to believe the first game to be the better of the two. But mechanically, atmospherically and in terms of often-horrific set pieces, *Dead Space 2* is the one to beat. It was cruising for a high score the whole time, but the second I set foot on the Ishimura, a double-figure sign-off was all but assured."

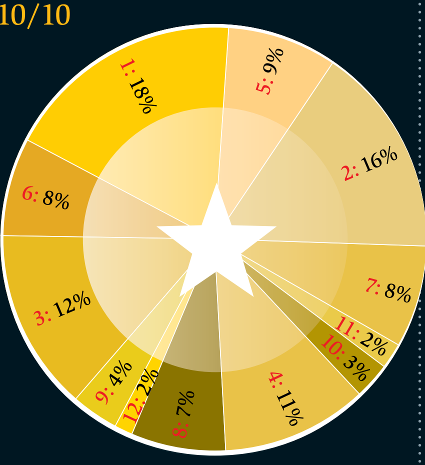
"Firstly, I just want to say thanks to the magazine for giving us such a prestigious rating," says *DS2* producer Steve Papoutsis when we meet him to chat about the upcoming *Dead Space 3*. "The team strives to deliver the highest-quality games possible, so when we see something like that it is a huge honour, and we get extremely excited. It's great motivation for the team, because throughout *Dead Space 2*'s development that's what we were striving for. With *Dead Space 2* we were pushing to create what we were calling a triple-A quality game. And with *Dead Space 3* we're trying to push ourselves to do even better, and it may seem silly but we're aiming for that with what we call quad-A, so four-A quality.

"Getting a great rating like that for *Dead Space 2* in a magazine like **games™** – that's made by gamers for gamers – is the kind of thing that makes us feel the best about our work. Because it means the people we were trying to make a great *Dead Space 2* experience for appreciated it and were having fun, and at the end of the day that's why we make games – we want people to have fun. So, it's really motivating, it's super flattering and it's a great honour."

And the winner is...

Which is the best 10/10 game? We asked games™'s readers to decide.

1. Fallout 3
2. Mass Effect 2
3. BioShock
4. Metroid Prime
5. Demon's Souls
6. Grand Theft Auto IV
7. Super Mario Galaxy 2
8. Burnout 3: Takedown
9. God Of War II
10. Dead Space 2
11. LittleBigPlanet 2
12. Gears Of War



Why you love: Fallout 3

■ "I'd have given it ten out of ten if it was just the soundtrack on the disc. The fact there was an entire nuclear wasteland to explore was an added bonus."
Guinnes1981

■ **"It took an existing franchise and took on radical new presentation that blew me away. Furthermore, the soundtrack perfectly fit the scene, and while the main storyline wasn't great, the subplots and diversions excelled."**
Shinymcshine

■ "The desolate landscape, the ruined buildings and towns, the little stories told by bodies left behind, and the real sense of danger that wandering too far from home brought. A game where you could just grab a rifle, fill up your backpack with provisions and just start walking to see where the world takes you."
Rumblecat

■ **"*Fallout 3* just for the sheer fact that I devoted so much of my life to playing it. *New Vegas* felt cheap in comparison."**
mobiletone

■ "*Fallout 3* all the way! I have a 9600GT PC running just this with an Xbox joypad linked to my 42-inch TV"
Arthur Scroggins

10/10 In (More) Numbers

■ Looking over **games™**'s shiny dozen, it's surprisingly hard to find patterns throughout. If there's any real 'winner' – other than gamers, of course – it's EA, which has published **three** of the 12 games. Only Nintendo and Sony are close to the leader, with **two** games each. When it comes to developers, however, the playing field is totally level. No single developer has yet produced more than one 10/10 game. For those gamers who like to participate in the format wars, the winner is the PS3, with a total of **seven** 10/10 titles on the system. Xbox 360 and PC are very close behind, however, with **six** games each, suggesting that the HD generation has produced more great games than the PS2 generation. Indeed, **ten** of the 12 games were released after the advent of the 360, though two of those were released on SD systems, with the Wii muddying the waters somewhat. No single year of release really stands out in the decade. Most years saw **one** or **two** 10/10 reviews, while only 2003, 2005 and, so far, 2012 remain free of top marks. Finally, when it comes to the global games industry, it's the USA that unsurprisingly takes gold, claiming **six** of the total 12. The UK comes in a distant second with **three** games, while Japan claims **two** and Canada, despite the number of huge studios based there, has produced only **one**. Poor Canada.

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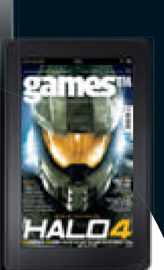
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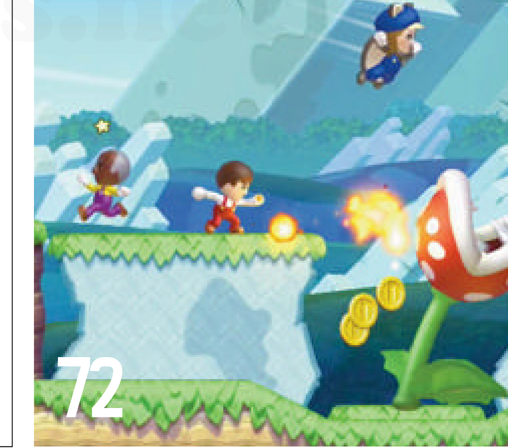
Reviews



After years on the run, has the Hitman magic been taken alive?

THE AVERAGE

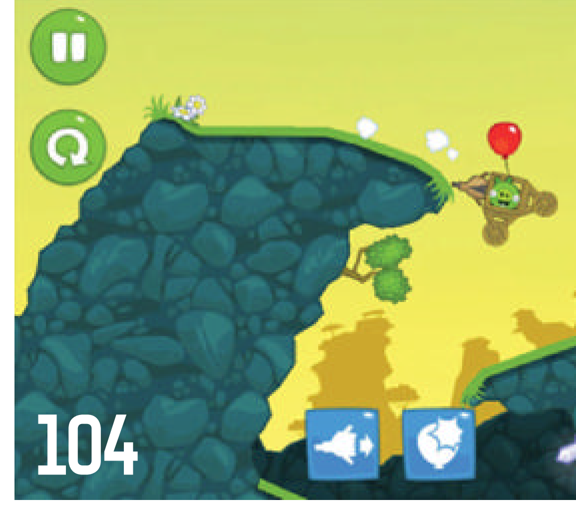
Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest – we'd never let that happen, and besides you'd smell it a mile off. And finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact, they are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists, designed to enlighten, inform, and engage. The gospel according to **games™**.



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AGREE/DISAGREE?

games™ is always right. But that doesn't stop some people disagreeing. Think we've got a review horribly wrong? Or have we nailed it?

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YOU MIGHT AS WELL JUMP

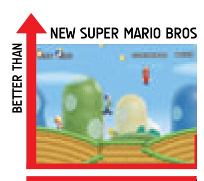
New Super Mario Bros U

DETAILS

FORMAT: Wii U
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: 30 November
PLAYERS: 1-5
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

NEW SUPER MARIO BROS





SUPER MARIO GALAXY 2

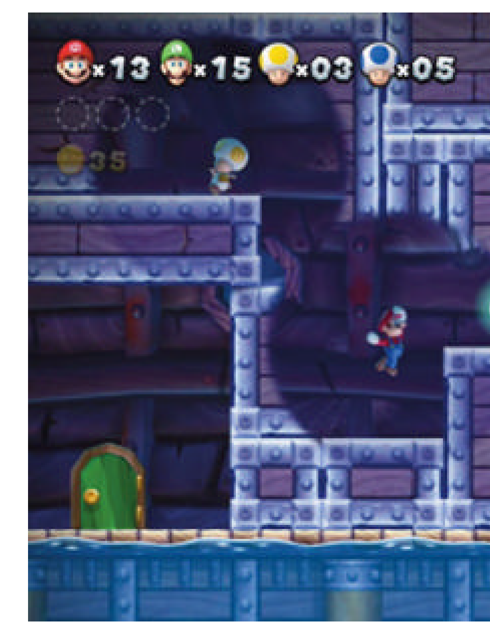
WORSE THAN

It seems a little unfair that Mario's Wii U debut arrives so shortly after the release of *New Super Mario Bros 2*, as initial impressions of his latest adventure border on exhausted routine. It could all be part of some cunning misdirection on Nintendo's part, because there's little distinction between the two games in the handful of opening stages, as an influx of overlapping elements beyond the customary platforming – including the flood of gold coinage that was introduced to a divisive reception in the 3DS instalment – make *Mario U* seem anything but unique.

Luckily, niggling feelings of repetitiveness soon take a back seat as Mario begins to delve further into the game's sizeable overworld. Presented as one giant map rather than split into smaller islands, the most obvious touchstone here is *Super Mario World*, and like the SNES offering this inviting landscape has been tightly constructed with hidden passageways and other secrets in mind. Indeed, much of *New Super Mario Bros U*'s staid template almost feels like a facade, masking an altogether more compelling *Mario* adventure than expected.

Nintendo's effortless craftsmanship serves both its expanded audience and veteran red caps alike, as stages have a deceptive simplicity, which masks an underlying mastery that diligently balances the dense chaos of four-player multiplayer on one hand, while remaining slick enough for speed-runners and treasure hunters alike.

No wonder, then, that the Wii U GamePad feels a bit short-changed. As Nintendo's omni-tool, it's here primarily utilised as an alternate display method for single-player – and with its softer hues, a surprisingly alluring one at that – but for an additional player participating in Boost mode, it represents little gameplay value. At its most useful, floating platforms can be placed to guide Mario to hidden areas, but usually the



Above: If you find yourself dying more than a few times on a stage, a handy Luigi guide will appear. Mario's sibling will take the recommended route and players can seize control of him at any point to resume play.

Below: This is without a doubt one of the finest-looking *Mario* games ever. Nintendo's leap to HD has been well worth the wait.

FAQs

Q. SAME OLD, SAME OLD?
Yes and no. It certainly adheres to the tried-and-tested *Mario* template, but the few flourishes are reinvigorating.

Q. HOW IS THE GAMEPAD?
Surprisingly light and ergonomically sound, but don't expect it to revolutionise gaming controls.

Q. HOW DOES MARIO LOOK IN HD?
Vibrant, bewitching and better than ever. We can't wait to see his first 3D foray into HD.

Below: Boss battles are incredibly easy throughout. Each of the Koopa gang can be beaten with little fuss. If only Nintendo put a bit more effort into these portions of the gameplay, as they haven't evolved at all since their original 8-bit days.



ROAD BLOCK

Throughout Mario's adventure in this latest world, multiple obstructions appear through the map that stop him in his tracks. While most of these will be enemy encounters that, if defeated, will surrender a bonus item, there are other dynamic elements at play that do much to enliven the overworld. An item-thieving rabbit aptly named Grabbit will plunder Toad's loot and can be chased through old levels, while various switches will reveal pathways to hidden stages. It's elements like this that have justifiably attracted comparisons to *Super Mario World* and make the map more than just a series of lines between A and B.





BACKED BY AN HD SHEEN THAT REDEFINES THE VIBRANCY OF THE MUSHROOM KINGDOM, THIS IS THE MOST CHARMING MARIO SINCE YOSHI'S ISLAND

GamePad user will end up feeling redundant and, overall, a little bit bored.

However, outside the story mode it's a different matter altogether. In Challenge mode, the GamePad player will again be tasked with placing platforms on the screen, but the engaging focus on energetic co-operative play transforms the sedentary task into a frantic thrill. These will mostly revolve around time trials, but inventive objectives such as avoiding the squirrel-like Waddlewings or keeping a shell in perpetual motion ensure that two players will share in the tension and elation as partnerships become fruitful.

In addition to the Challenge mode, Boost Rush (a GamePad-assisted speed run) and Coin Battle (a spin on *New Super Mario Bros 2*'s Coin Rush mode) are welcome and, much like its 3DS counterpart, share a fascination with score. But what all these modes have in common is a sense of rhythm. It bears close comparison to last year's *Rayman Origins*, as players pursue Bowser across the diverse stages.

Similar to the Wii outing, the soundtrack reacts to the player's movements, while Koopa Troopers perform a little jig to the beat and Baby Yoshis sing along to the infectious melody as music is put to significant use. Backed by a high-definition sheen that redefines the vibrancy of the Mushroom Kingdom, this is unequivocally the most, dare we say it, charming *Mario* adventure since *Yoshi's Island*.

And the green dino has an integral role to play here too. While Yoshi will appear in a handful of stages, his infantile kin represent one of the few notable additions. What's interesting to note is how little the Baby Yoshis are pressed upon the player as a gameplay solution. Of the three breeds – Kirby-like inflatable pink, luminous yellow that lights dark passages, and bubble-blowing blue – only the yellow is ever essential to a stage, and that's merely on a couple of occasions. They can all be found residing on different isles on the main map and can be escorted to assist in most of the stages, but the game never relies upon them.

There are other dynamic elements to the map screen as well. A sticky-fingered rabbit hides among previously completed stages and can be chased for a bonus; random enemies obstruct pathways and can be fought for another prize; elsewhere, you'll see a floating stage concealed by a secret pathway. It offers strong encouragement to retrace your footsteps and venture back into previously explored areas with the enhanced skills that only experience brings.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

NEW PAD: The Wii U GamePad enables another player to place floating platforms around the environment that can aid Mario and chums in sticky situations. It can also be used to stun enemies.

That last statement isn't exactly news to the fervent Star Coin hunters. They remain one of the steadfast features but are certainly more of a robust challenge here than expected. On top of that, certain stages undergo an unanticipated difficulty spike, particularly in the haunted house segments of the story, which both illustrate its most creative stage design and its most fiendish. These characterise an otherwise incongruent moment among the largely broad appeal of the rest of the game, but they are also some of its most interesting segments. Areas where the game doesn't just feel like another by-the-numbers retread, but instead something far more surprising and challenging.

But the mere fact that it manages to be a slave for two masters and for the most part pulls it off is a sterling achievement in itself. Mario's Wii U debut will no doubt attract the usual detractors and jaded observers, but there's more to this than rigid routine. It just all depends on what *you* want from it.

VERDICT 8/10

CAN WE HAVE A 3D MARIO GAME NEXT, PLEASE?

THE RIDE OF YOUR NINTENDO LIFE

Nintendo Land

When Nintendo set out to replicate the modern-day amusement park with *Nintendo Land*, who would have thought it would do so with such ironic accuracy? Nintendo's approximation of Disneyland, like its real-life equivalent, is bursting with infectious cheeriness, features a litany of mascots paraded from its history, and suffers the inevitable wax and wane that accompanies such diverse attractions spread across its park.

In many ways, *Nintendo Land* is the most ambitious of launch titles. Not only does it serve as an introduction to the new GamePad, but there's a catch-all mentality and introductory nature to the attractions that often finds itself working to its own detriment. Take 'Pikmin Adventure', for example: a co-operative mini-game that encourages Pikmin-dressed Miis to band together against clockwork critters, while a GamePad-wielding Captain Olimar leads the charge. The fundamental *Pikmin* formula has been diluted, the purpose lost between inanely punching blocks and killing predators. These sorts of antics are regular occurrences; mini-game interpretations of popular games that function as an introduction to the basic premise of core gaming brands to novice players.

'Pikmin Adventure' is the worst in this category, but 'Captain Falcon's Twister Race' isn't trailing far behind. A solely single-player game, it's a breezy excursion but one lacking in precision, as the GamePad is twisted on its side using the gyro sensor to navigate the track. But it's hard to begrudge Nintendo for including the control method, as awkward as it is, with so few of *Nintendo Land*'s exhibits demonstrating the potential of the GamePad.

There are times where you'll be staring down at the controller, wondering whether Nintendo's wayward ambition has ultimately proven misguided. How else can you explain 'Octopus Dance', a relatively undemanding copycat dance-off game, opting to use the dual analogue sticks for movement, with leaning to the left and right achieved by tilting the pad, when there's a motion controller in our palms? Is this not what it's designed for?

Perhaps the more pertinent question is why Nintendo placed so much emphasis on an ill-considered single-player in the first place. These are most certainly the weakest of the available games on offer and rarely sustain appeal beyond a single playthrough – the exception to this being 'Donkey Kong's Crash Course', as precise handling of the GamePad is used to guide a cart down a Meccano-like maze. It's a unique twist on the source inspiration that remains relevant and lip-gnawingly challenging.

Peculiarly, the best application for the GamePad is constantly proven to be as an independent screen. It makes sense, though: what better way to enhance the enjoyment of competitive multiplayer than enabling an additional player to gain a unique perspective on the on-screen chaos? The tension, strategy and riotous enjoyment that this ensures are inimitably Nintendo.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

TALE SPIN: *Nintendo Land*'s best games subvert retro classics into something simple and inventive.
EXTRA PADDING: The GamePad enhances multiplayer a great deal with its independent screen.

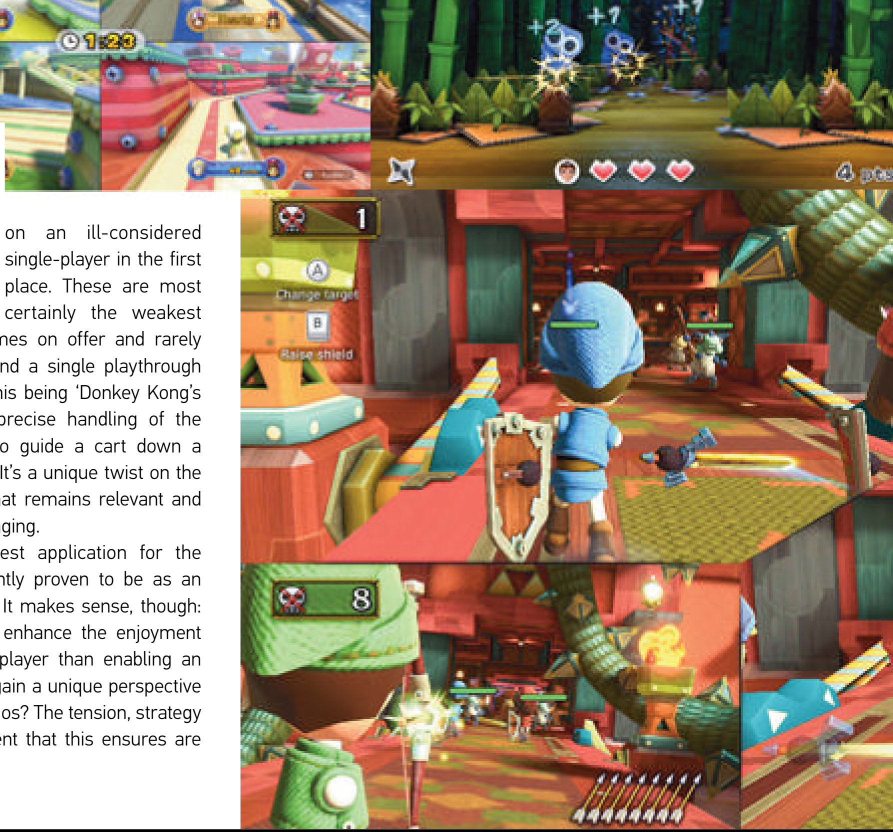
DETAILS

FORMAT: Wii U
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: 30 November
PLAYERS: 1-5
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Right: 'Mario Chase' is a huge amount of fun. If you don't have enough friends to play with, AI-controlled Yoshis will act as partners and sniff out the fugitive Mario. They prove rather helpful, flagging up which coloured area of the stage Mario is located in when spotted.





BETTER THAN — WII SPORTS

WORSE THAN — WII SPORTS RESORT

Left: The best single-player game that *Nintendo Land* has to offer, 'Donkey Kong's Crash Course' makes deft use of the GamePad. It takes precise tilts to steer your car down the course without tearing it apart. An expert challenge.

THE GAME CREEPS BEYOND THE TRAPPINGS OF A PARTY GAME AND INTO SOMETHING ELSE ENTIRELY

PARK LIFE

One of the more interesting elements that Nintendo fails to capitalise on is the hub world, a hovering futuristic station populated by Miis that connects all of *Nintendo Land*'s many games. There doesn't seem to be a huge amount of point to the arena. While it'll likely enable players to interact with friends asynchronously, we can't help but feel that Nintendo is missing a trick by not being able to customise the world with gameplay achievements. Alas, with Nintendo's customary ignorance towards the importance of online multiplayer seemingly continuing into a new generation, the likelihood is that this lot will remain vacant.



Left: The *Zelda* mini-game bears the closest resemblance to its inspiration, with precise swordplay and archery involved.

FAQs

Q. WHAT'S THE BEST GAME?
'Luigi's Ghost Mansion' is thrilling for both the GamePad user and the Wii Remote players.

Q. HOW ABOUT THE WORST?
'Octopus Dance' is boring and doesn't make adequate use of the new GamePad.

Q. WORTH GETTING, THEN?
It depends on how often you'll play multiplayer. There's only one single-player game really worth your time.

It's here that we find the star attractions. 'Mario Chase' has a GamePad user hiding around a maze while four Wii Remote players hunt them out, the GamePad screen offering both a third-person perspective of the character and a map screen that tracks the positioning of other players. It's easily the finest title on offer, but it relinquishes part of its appeal with every absent competitor.

Likewise, it's a fate that the excellent 'Luigi's Ghost Mansion' suffers. Almost the reverse of 'Mario Chase', the GamePad player uses the controller to navigate around a maze as an invisible ghost to capture wandering players, while the Wii Remote users must bust the roaming ghoul with their flashlights. There are various tiers of strategy at work here, as flashlight batteries steadily deplete, lightning fills the room and briefly reveals the spectre's location, and a special move enables the GamePad player to unleash a power cut that leaves players defenceless.

This is *Nintendo Land* at its strongest, as players pool resources and scramble in twitchy reluctance in search of an unseen entity. This is what party games are all about. But it's a difficult balancing act that other attractions struggle to grasp. You need look no further than 'Animal Crossing: Sweet Day', a breezy competitive mode where Wii Remote players gobble treats with the GamePad player in hot pursuit. Controlling two guards with the GamePad's twin analogue sticks, at times you feel like you need gecko eyes to keep track of movements, but it's an engaging challenge, albeit an unfortunately one-sided one.

Co-op is similarly hit and miss. 'Pikmin Adventure' has superficial appeal but lacks the necessary depth, and likewise 'Metroid Blast' is a barebones third-person shooter that, while enjoyable, doesn't endure much of a time investment. And then there's 'The Legend Of Zelda: Battle Quest', which has a GamePad bowman accompanying up to four sword-wielding Link-a-likes across expeditions.

What is most surprising about this addition is how robust it is. This could have easily been another *Link's Crossbow Training*, but instead it's a thrill, nurturing teamwork and requiring more than a few wild gestures to make it through to the end of each mission.

At times like this, the game creeps beyond the trappings of a party game and into something else entirely. As we've come to expect from Nintendo, it's nothing short of intoxicating, but there's a lack of consistency and conviction in the product that is unusual for the developer. A throw-it-all-at-the-wall approach that is uncharacteristically capricious. When the game works, it's one of the finest party games on offer, but Nintendo's confusion over what it wants to achieve with the Wii U GamePad results in an erratic compilation short on hits.

VERDICT 7/10
OFTEN EXCELLENT, MOSTLY DULL AN ERRATIC PARTY GAME

LIKE A CHIEF IN THE NIGHT

Halo 4*

***Halo 4* is a game of questions and answers. Can 343 do the impossible and re-create Bungie's untouchable magic?** How did Master Chief survive? Who are the Forerunners? Does anyone care about *Halo* any more? Well, one thing's for certain. Microsoft does. *Halo 4* is a work of extraordinary scope and scale, of a budget that most games couldn't even compute, and of a level of precision and execution that few teams could ever manage. Can 343 follow Bungie? Quite simply, yes.

Not that it seems that way at first, though. The opening hour of *Halo 4*'s campaign is a muted affair. While it looks spectacular – surely the finest visual feast on the 360 – the protracted firefights against the Covenant are overly familiar. 343 has captured the *Halo* essence – often referred to as the 30 seconds of fun but in actual fact a cosmic concoction of physics, AI and unscripted emergent madness – and it has done so with confidence. However, *Halo* fans will notice little quirks and irks that initially feel like they could pull the whole experience apart.

Comparing *Halo 4*'s AI to any other shooter is easy. It's better. Enemies work in teams. Elites are crafty, Jackals precise. They act both predictably and erratically, making it seem like individual troops with their own personalities. Saying this, though, they're not quite as believable as they have been before. Occasionally Elites will stop and stare at you. They'll throw too many grenades. Enemy placements sometimes feel scripted rather than organic. These are small issues – probably imperceptible to those not veterans of countless *Halo* campaigns – but they do exist, and they remind you that the grand masters aren't at the controls any more.

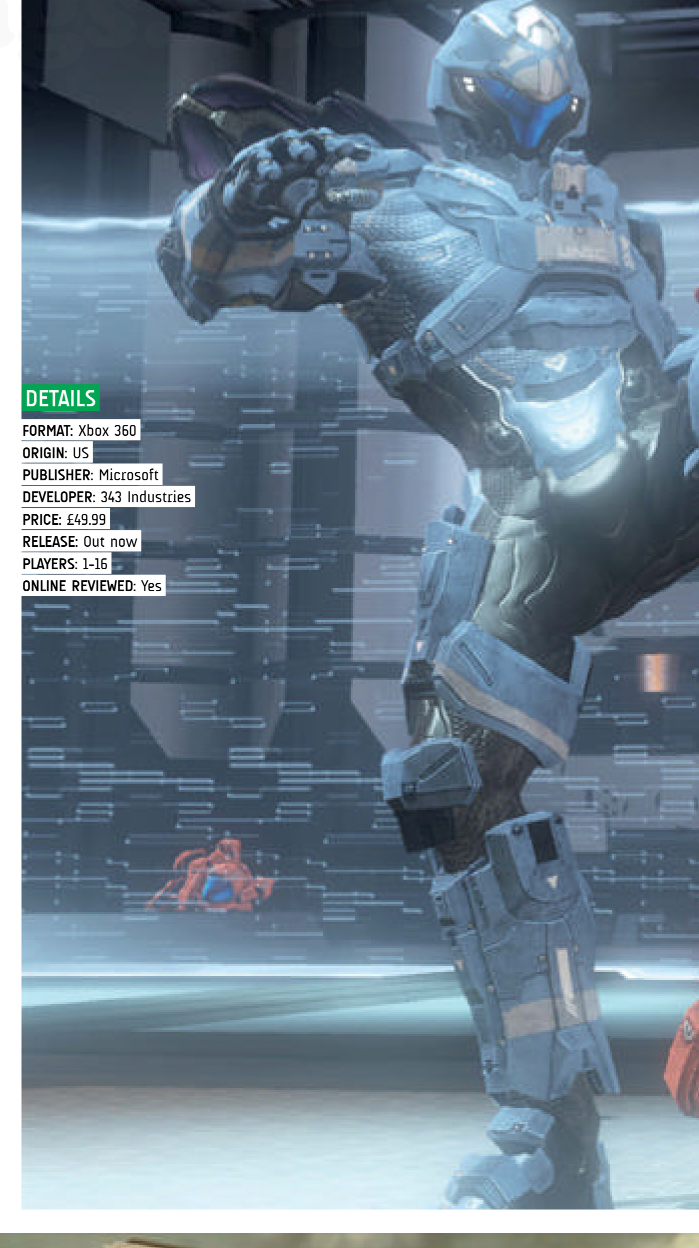
Thankfully, these small issues soon give way once the Forerunners turn up. These curious, imposing new cybernetic foes bring

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

LOOKING GOOD, CHIEF: The work 343 has done to *Halo 4*'s visuals is astonishing. It almost looks like next-gen tech. Even compared to the impressive *Halo: Reach*, this is a new benchmark.

FIGHTING THE PROMETHEAN KNIGHTS IS A GENUINELY DIFFERENT PROSPECT, REQUIRING NEW BATTLEFIELD TACTICS AND PROCESSES



DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Microsoft
DEVELOPER: 343 Industries
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-16
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes





Right: If you've been chucking grenades, firing assault rifles and meleeing Elites for ten years now, you will not be disappointed.



Above: There are a handful of enormous battles that are staggering in scale, especially as you can enjoy them in anything from a Ghost all the way up to the enormous Mammoth. Or on foot, if you're feeling particularly brave. Right: The brash colours of previous *Halo* games have been replaced with more muted tones. The strong oranges and pale pinks are still beautiful.





THESE. ARE. SPARTANS

In an effort to keep players aboard the UNSC Infinity, 343 is spending a considerable amount of time and money on Spartan Ops, a weekly episodic series of cut-scenes and co-op levels that combine the best of campaign and the now-defunct Firefight. It's a curious choice, but one *Halo* fans will likely lap up, thanks to the continued story of Spartans doing what Spartans do – killing aliens. Played with three buddies and on high difficulty, the current Spartan Ops provide focused action in hastily constructed sandboxes, and are a pleasant diversion from War Games and the campaign itself. It'll be fascinating to see how this mode develops over time.

elements of the Covenant to the party, but also play by their own rules. The Promethean Knights are the leaders, and they're an absolute nightmare to contend with. Not only are they as tough and clever as Elites, but they can teleport, deploy flying sentry droids that catch and return your grenades and fire down protective shields, and rush you in a split second to deliver a crushing melee attack.

Unlike, say, the Brutes, who were an underrated antagonist group, but one that never truly held its own against the Elites, fighting Promethean Knights is a genuinely different prospect, requiring new battlefield tactics and processes. On Heroic difficulty and above, even a single one presents a serious challenge. And, of course, they benefit from having no Bungie equivalent to compare them to. These are 343's babies, and they're a nasty bunch.

The giant development team is not satisfied with just shifting up *Halo*'s combat tempo, though. As the campaign progresses, some of the finest missions in *Halo* history roar out of the screen. When Covenant and Forerunners compete for screen time, and you have a few humans along for the ride – with vehicles left, right and centre, naturally – there are battles that truly eclipse anything in the series' history. These are the moments when you have to pause the game to take stock of what you've just witnessed and battled through.

Perhaps more than any Bungie *Halo*, though, the campaign suffers from inconsistency. Some sections feel poorly thought out – either far too hard or unfair. Checkpoints are sometimes hugely spaced, and you could find yourself repeating long, arduous stretches of combat multiple times. Of course, there are the endless tactical options to try out along the way, but there's not quite the same sense of relentless flow as *Halo: Reach*, say.

Overall, though, 343 has done marvellously with its first *Halo* campaign. The scripting and cut-scenes are far beyond what the series has managed before, and even in its weirder moments, it's coherent and engaging. Some of the humour of the previous games might be missing, but when it's replaced with the kind of fan service we wouldn't dare spoil, all is instantly forgiven. And there's still plenty of *Halo* magic, of fist-pumping Master Chief heroism, the likes of which no other shooter series has ever really got close to. When *Halo 4* gets it right, and it does often, nothing can touch it.

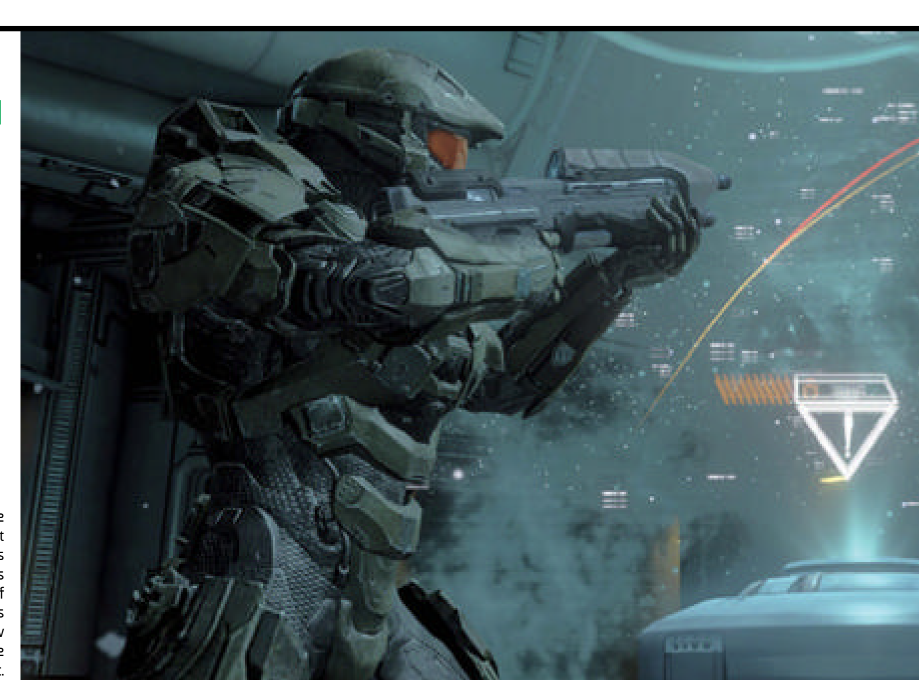
Brilliantly, the same can be said for multiplayer, which could well go down as

FAQs

Q. IS 343 AS GOOD AS BUNGIE?
Not quite as good at AI and campaign-building, but better at designing a rewarding multiplayer.

Q. DO WE SEE MASTER CHIEF'S FACE?
Why on earth would you want to? How would you like him to look?

Q. HOW'S THE MUSIC?
Fine, but Marty O'Donnell has nothing to worry about. His legacy is still safe.



Right *Halo 4*'s visuals are often astounding. Just when it seemed like this generation of consoles had simply run out of power, games like this and *Forza Horizon* show there's some life in the old box yet.



TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

30 MINS

Everything's feeling very familiar, if a little lacking in personality, as you explore the Forward Unto Dawn, which is in decent condition for being split in half. Looks spectacular, though.

10 HOURS

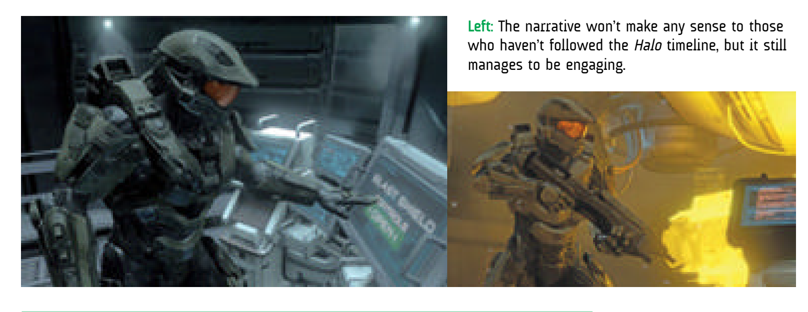
The campaign is over, and it was suitably epic. Some of the best missions in *Halo* history, with a few dodgy bits in between. Now we're on to Spartan Ops and the meat of every *Halo* game: multiplayer.

5 DAYS

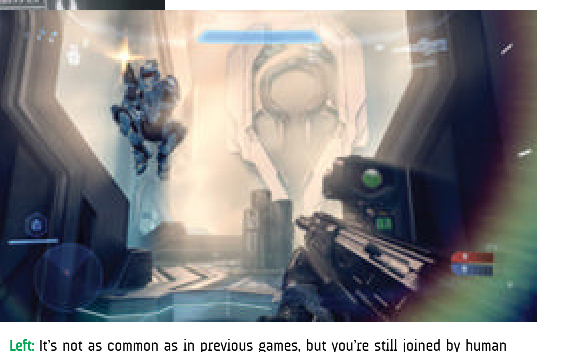
The multiplayer has sunk its teeth in, and is proving more rewarding and modern than any prior *Halo*. That unscripted madness is still maintained, even with the obvious *COD* inspirations.

FAN FIC

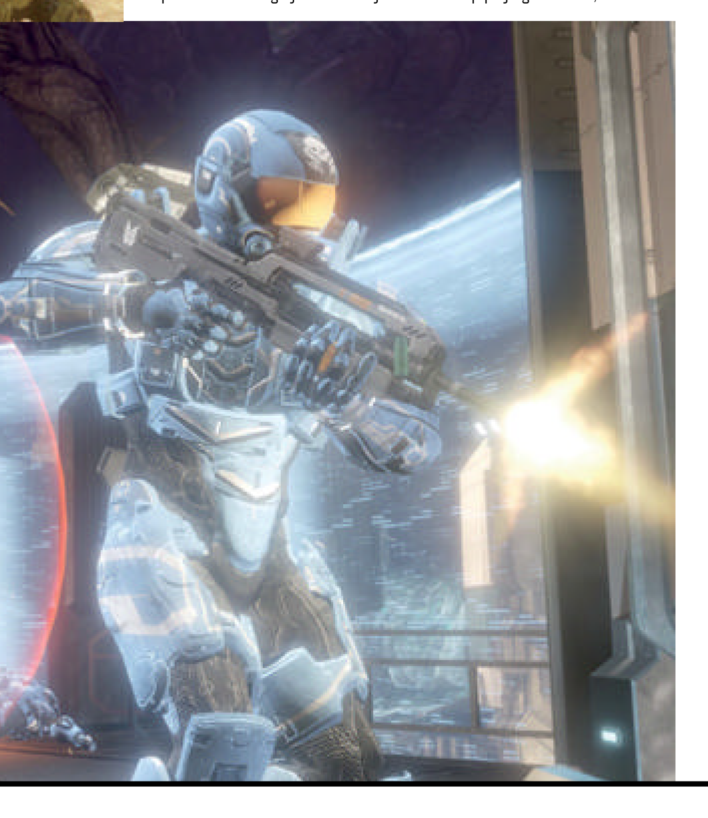
If you're a bit confused about the *Halo* fiction, you're not the only one. After a reasonably comprehensive, self-contained plot in the original *Combat Evolved*, Bungie's story took a turn for the insane, mixing space politics, religion, galaxy-hopping and all manner of twists and turns into something only the dedicated could ever follow. Add in the fact that the wider story is only really explained in the *Halo* novels, which number in the double figures, and it's no wonder people feel lost. Thankfully, there are some handy summaries on YouTube, and *Halo 4* itself does a decent job explaining what happened in the past. And sometimes, during the series' more dreamlike moments, it's best not to overanalyse. Master Chief isn't much of a thinker.



Left: The narrative won't make any sense to those who haven't followed the *Halo* timeline, but it still manages to be engaging.



Left: It's not as common as in previous games, but you're still joined by human troops at points, which always adds to the atmosphere. Trying to keep them alive is a thrilling metagame, and one rewarded by Achievements.



Below: The online play is lag-free and thoroughly modern. This could be a contender to *COD*'s throne this year, thanks to the necessary and well-implemented ranking system. If everyone would stop playing *Minecraft*, that is.

HALO HAS ALWAYS HAD A SYMBIOTIC RELATIONSHIP WITH THE XBOX, AND HALO 4 MAINTAINS THAT TRADITION. IT FEELS SPECIAL

the finest in the series' illustrious history. According to the fiction, the games of red versus blue all take place in a simulation aboard the UNSC Infinity, in some *Star Trek*-esque holodeck, but in reality it's the same *Halo* we know and love. Except it's not quite the same. The signature mode is, of course, still Team Slayer, which remains four-on-four, played on moderately sized maps with variable terrain and plenty of verticality.

Whereas *Halo* multiplayer used to focus around control of the power weapons on each map, 343 has dragged the game into the modern era. There's a proper ranking system to plough through now, with Spartan Points awarded as you rank up, which can be spent on various unlocks for your loadouts.

At a basic level, this means much of the combat is focused on the balanced weapons – assault rifles, DMRs, Promethean Light Rifles and the like – meaning it feels like a blend of *COD* and classic *Halo*. It's not all about dominating with the Energy Sword any more. There are perks, too, both active and passive, so you can make your Spartan a bit quicker, or a bit tougher, but also deck him out with camo or the ability to see through walls. It's a natural evolution of *Halo: Reach*'s Armor Abilities, but with more options and variety.

And just because the game's not as focused on power weapons, it doesn't mean they're not in there. Get a few kills and you'll earn ordnance – a care package, essentially – which can be fired into the ground next to you to collect. You choose from three options, and can either grab a power-up like the Overshield or a power weapon. Even if someone appears to be dominating, though, the instant respawns mean they can no longer clear out a team and isolate single opponents. It's a radical overhaul to the flow of the action.

Fear not, though, as this is still very much *Halo*. Gun battles are protracted and dramatic, grenades remain crucial, and the game still elicits the kind of jaw-dropping, Theater-mode-rewinding moments of magic that it always has. This is perhaps demonstrated best in the new Dominion mode, which borrows from *COD*'s Domination and *Halo*'s own 3 Plots, and asks teams of six to control three points across a battlefield. It adds its *Halo* flavour by allowing teams to then fortify each position so ordnance can spawn there, meaning each match eventually turns into a huge melee of power weapons and vehicles. It's not as pure as Team Slayer, but it's a perfect recipe for madness.

Throw Spartan Ops (see boxout) into the mix, and you've got a phenomenal package; a game that more than justifies its asking price and a true blockbuster. *Halo* has always had a symbiotic relationship with the Xbox, and *Halo 4* maintains that tradition. It feels special, still. Essential, even, as if this is the game that you're supposed to be playing on this console.

The question many will ask, ultimately, is how *Halo 4* stacks up against its predecessors, and in truth it's hard to answer at this time. It'll take multiple runs through the campaign, hours and hours more multiplayer, and swaths of Spartan Ops missions to truly understand how good *Halo 4* is. There's one answer we can say with certainty, though: this is absolutely a *Halo* game. And that's all that most fans would ever need to hear.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

AI, MARINE: *Halo 4*'s enemy AI is good; better than almost any shooter around. But it's not as good as Bungie's. The combat loses a touch of its magic when the AI very occasionally grinds to a halt.

VERDICT 9/10

FAMILIAR, EPIC AND SPECTACULAR. A CREDIT TO 343

STILL LOOKING SHARP

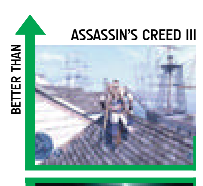
Hitman: Absolution

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PC, PS3
ORIGIN: Denmark
PUBLISHER: Square Enix
DEVELOPER: IO Interactive
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

ASSASSIN'S CREED III





HITMAN: BLOOD MONEY

AS GOOD AS

A lot can change in six years. Console generations end, new gaming fads create a stranglehold on the industry, and then some peaked-hooded upstart comes along and redefines a whole genre. Agent 47's much-vaunted return has had a few issues to deal with, then, not least its own marketing campaign that was high on leather-clad nuns and short on the series' customary sneakiness.

What shouldn't come as much of a surprise is that *Hitman: Absolution* doesn't really deal in absolutes. It's the kind of notion that's not immediately easy to grasp, but one that the game spends an appropriate amount of time conveying. A tutorial lays down the foundations, but it's not until the first Chinatown-set assassination mission, 'King of Chinatown', that you truly feel the empowerment and freedom the game has to offer.

The fact is that the chapter can be completed in a matter of a few short minutes – strolling up to the target and placing a couple of bullets in his chest will get the job done and commence a rip-roaring gunfight across the bustling streets. It's a method of dispatch that offers much gratification and full-bodied exuberance. Gunplay can be considered the major revelation for the series' return, here tightly constructed mechanics efficiently transforming any clumsy stealth attempts into a robust third-person cover shooter, requiring a proportionate amount of skill to survive.

This is not the concession to a wider audience that you may suspect, as stealth remains very much the star of the show. As stated above, a mission can be completed in a couple of minutes, and that remains true, even targeting that coveted Silent Assassin ranking. However, such flawless executions are facilitated by spending a significant portion of your game time restarting checkpoints repeatedly until you've ascertained the best possible murderous scenario. There is a plethora of options to satisfy a homicidal appetite to boot: do you push him down a



Above: Following targets to scripted destinations will often reveal a potential demise that may have gone unnoticed.

Below: The crowd scenes are some of the game's most visually impressive and challenging moments. With so much happening on the screen at once and witnesses as far as the eye can see, remaining incognito is a problem.

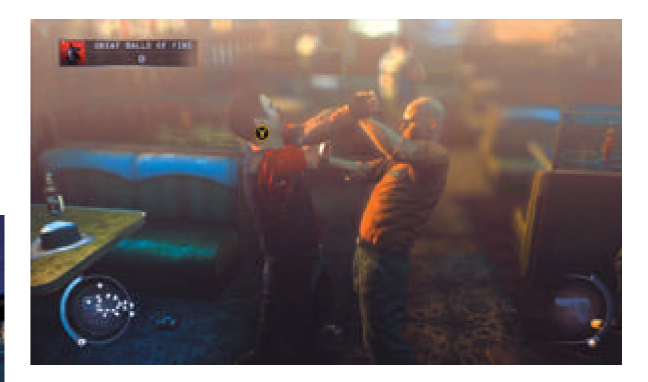
FAQs

Q. A RETURN TO FORM?
Most certainly. You can forget *Kane & Lynch*.

Q. REALLY?
Well, don't completely forget them. They both appear in fairly pointless, albeit welcome, cameos.

Q. I LIKE THIRD-PERSON SHOOTERS?
That's not really a question, but you'll be well accommodated here.

Below: You can prompt a QTE scuffle by rocking up to an enemy and hitting the action button, but they're also used to instil panic when 47's cover is blown.



DRAMATIC ENTRANCE

Hitman has always had cinematic ideals – just look at the end of *Blood Money* – but *Absolution* really has a ball orchestrating scenarios that enable Agent 47 to go ultimate badass on everyone. One particular mission has a giant birthday cake locked away in one of the rooms. If you dispatch the stripper inside and jump in, guards will enter the room and gather around, waiting for the party to start. Jumping out of the cake, 47 enters Point Shooting mode and clears the whole room of guards in a flash. It might not be the most tactical or subtle way to execute a whole floor of enemies, but it's inventive, energetic action beats like this that galvanise the gameplay at just the right moments.

IO INTERACTIVE HAS RECAPTURED THE HITMAN ESSENCE, AND AS THE GAME PROGRESSES MISSIONS BECOME MORE COMPLEX

manhole? Bamboozle him with a clever disguise and lure him into a confined space? Or just rig some explosives to his car and make him go kaboom? The multitude of optional grisly demises is part of what makes each self-contained chapter of the game's episodic structure so compelling and replayable.

IO Interactive has successfully recaptured the *Hitman* essence, and as the game progresses missions become more complex and multi-layered affairs. Multiple dynamic events take place simultaneously, and studying the environment becomes key, as does unending patience and *Groundhog Day*-style restarts that enable slow, progressive improvements on your last attempt. It's a process made easier with Instinct, Agent 47's sixth sense that highlights targets and items of interest, while also seeing through walls and displaying patrol routes of important individuals. It's a mechanic than runs the risk of oversimplifying the game, but instead it just focuses its more opaque moments, tightening the structure and providing a helpful nudge in the right direction when needed, without compromising what makes it such a challenge to begin with.

CONNECTED

EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY

KILLING TIME: Using Instinct will enable 47 to scan his surroundings for objects and targets. In this mode he can enter Point Shooting, which enables the player to pick targets to execute in quick succession.

Another element that isn't lost is the tongue-in-cheek tone. While emphasis has been placed on the script and acting quite impressively – the story comes across like a cross between *Man On Fire* and Robert Rodriguez's south-of-the-border efforts, replete with intriguing lowlifes – there's plenty of humour to be found. Hiding among the shadows and eavesdropping on NPCs reveals stories of mistreated strippers, lucky teddy bears and corrupt officials. Some just paint a more vivid portrait of the world that 47 inhabits, while others are simply there to pause for a rare beat of levity. And then there are the colourful costumes that just underline the absurdity of it all.

You've got to admire the way that everything jiggles in *Hitman: Absolution*. It's a bizarrely proud technological feat, one made possible with IO Interactive's proprietary Glacier 2 engine. For a game so stuffed with detail, the world does little to break the immersion, from the way the fat wobbles on a giant wrestler, to the disparate art direction of each new locale and the large-scale environments that raise their own challenges. How do you kill three targets undetected when you're surrounded by hundreds of potential eyewitnesses?

Even if you find yourself completely clueless, a range of challenges listed at the end of each stage displays all of the weapons and costumes, alongside cryptic Achievements that hint at the most inventive means of assassination. Completing these improves your score between missions and encourages more than one return visit to each stage to make the most out of what it has to offer.

It could be said that there's a little too much signposting in some of the stages. A conveniently placed sniper rifle leaning against the window frame of a top-floor apartment appears contrived, included for the sake of players looking for a less demanding experience. But most players won't feel an urge to pick it up, rather continuing to skulk around in the shadows, chucking a bottle at a dustbin to cause a quick distraction while digging deeper into the stage's subtle design.

IO Interactive has returned to the series with renewed relevance, indulging both sides of the action-adventure genre with significant aplomb and endowing the player with all the tools to make Agent 47 whoever they want him to be. It's a compelling return to form, featuring some of the series' most well-crafted, inviting and testing stages, and while much has changed in the six-year interim, you'll be pleased to hear that Agent 47 hasn't.





VERDICT 8/10
ABSOLUTION IS IMPECCABLY EXECUTED

GET YOUR SNEAK ON

Dishonored

Despite the fact that 'classic' stealth franchises like *Hitman* and *Splinter Cell* seem to be reaching out to the *Call Of Duty* crowd of late, it's not as though those who enjoy sneaking around have had nothing to play. XBLA gem *Mark Of The Ninja* fused *Metal Gear Solid* with *Hitman* on a 2D plane to create something truly special, for instance, while hands-on access to IO's latest proved that Agent 47 hasn't quite embraced the all-out action approach suggested by early footage of *Absolution*. In the meantime, though, stealth fans would do well to check out Arkane's *Dishonored*, if only because it's probably the most traditional and focused sneak-'em-up to hit the market in years.

Welcome to Dunwall, a city that feels like all the most iconic elements of Victorian London crunched together in a steampunk vice. Perhaps the most striking thing about *Dishonored* is how much Arkane invests in its fiction and lore, developing Dunwall and its residents as real places and people despite the quirky art style and supernatural themes, while allowing nothing to creep through from Videogameland to break that fourth wall. It's a world in which it is easy to get lost – both literally and metaphorically – and one that truly rewards exploration as much as it demands it.

With early open-world misnomers long since shelved, it's not hard to see why Arkane was so keen not to have its game lumped in with the likes of *Assassin's Creed* and *GTA*. Each of *Dishonored*'s nine missions takes place in its own little section of Dunwall, a walled garden made up of two or three decent-sized areas joined together by load screens. It's for this reason that the game doesn't hesitate to recommend a full install of the disc, a suggestion we'd second if you want exploration to be as painless and fluid as possible. Within each of these areas, there are myriad routes to take in reaching your eventual goal, though which you settle on will largely depend on which skills you've been investing discovered runes into. Your initial power, Blink, allows you to teleport short distances – once you learn to keep the mischievous target cursor in check, at least – while more offensively minded abilities are better suited for those not really looking for the pure stealth experience.

But between a 100G Achievement for reaching the credits without killing anybody and the way it clearly advises against full-on assaults by both outnumbering and outgunning over-eager players, *Dishonored* deserves to be approached on its own terms. Sneak around properly, taking in all the nuance, atmosphere and narrative-nourishing side quests, and the game will take maybe twice as long to see through – a far better investment and easily the best way

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PC, PS3
ORIGIN: France
PUBLISHER: Bethesda
DEVELOPER: Arkane Studios
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Below: Some of the execution animations are horrific. The ones on normal enemies are bad enough, but most of the main hits seem to have several blood-curdling unique ones as well.



FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

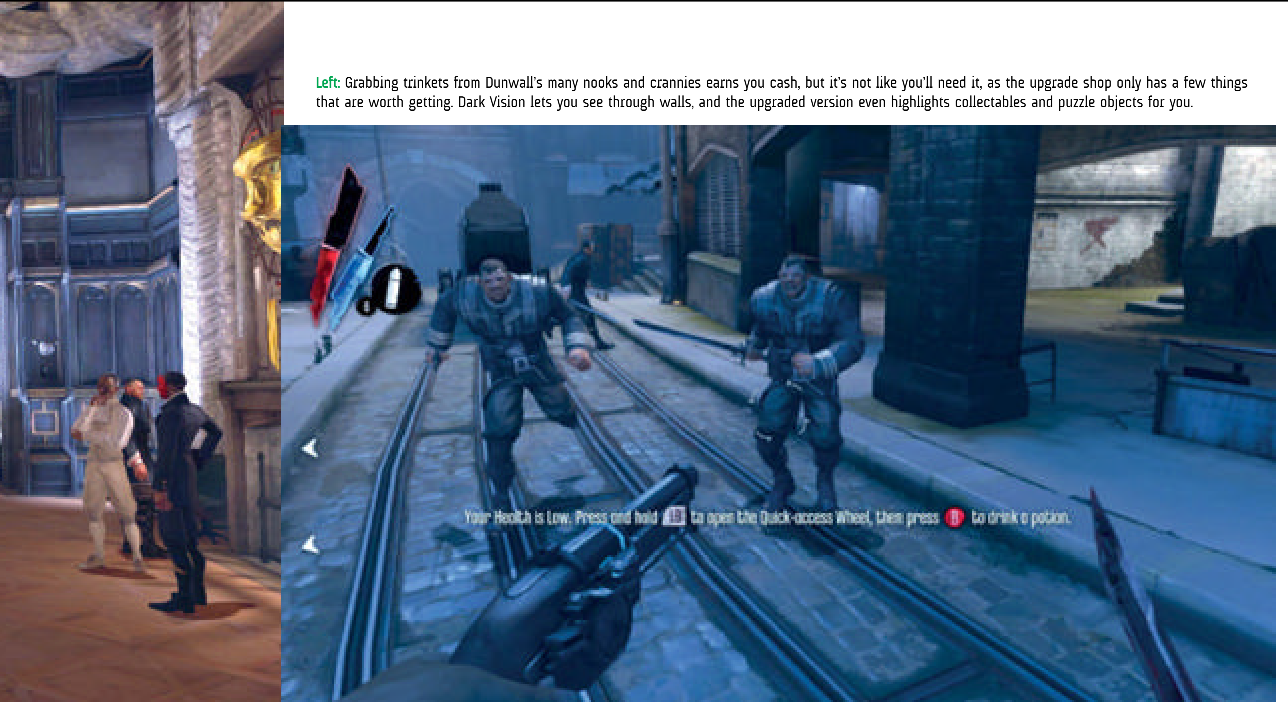
THE WAITING GAME: Find yourself a nice hiding spot and settle down for a while. Gaps in enemy patrol patterns, particularly later in the game, can be a nightmare to spot, let alone exploit.

Right: Dying in *Dishonored* is doubly frustrating. If you haven't saved in a while, trying to rush back to where you were is only going to get you killed that much faster.

ARKANE HAS COME GOOD WITH ARGUABLY THIS GENERATION'S FINEST STEALTH TITLE, SO LOVINGLY CRAFTED THAT IT BEGS TO BE PLAYED

FURTHER READING: THE PRICE OF FREEDOM | FEATURE | ISSUE 126 | PAGE 22

Left: Grabbing trinkets from Dunwall's many nooks and crannies earns you cash, but it's not like you'll need it, as the upgrade shop only has a few things that are worth getting. Dark Vision lets you see through walls, and the upgraded version even highlights collectables and puzzle objects for you.



BETTER THAN

DARK MESSIAH OF MIGHT & MAGIC





WORSE THAN

BIOSHOCK

FAQs

Q. HOW MANY POWERS?
A total of five active ones and four passive ones, each of which can be levelled up once.

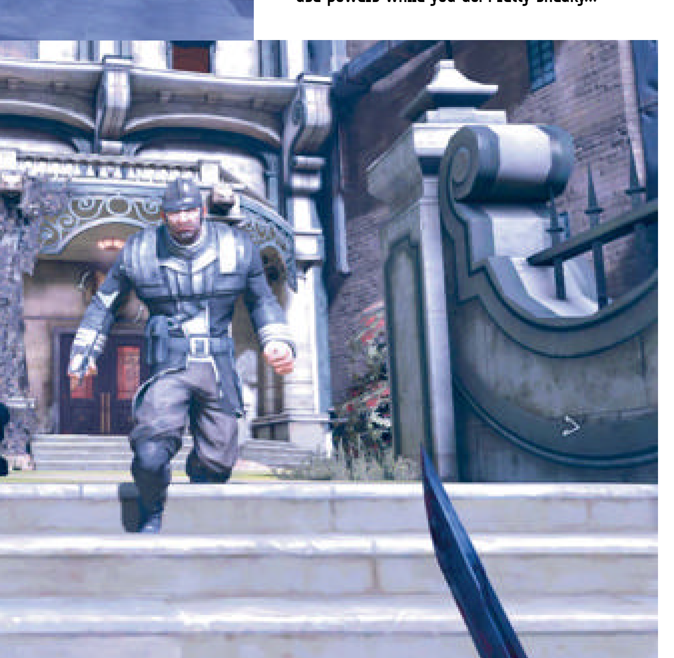
Q. BEST ONE?
While summoning rat swarms and tornados might be cool, basic teleport power Blink is by far the most powerful in terms of what it can do.

Q. EXTRA STUFF?
Precious little. After the credits you can go round again for the other ending or replay old missions with the same setup.



BEAT SURRENDER

Dishonored's well-realised steampunk stylings present many an opportunity to impress, though one of its finest items is actually among the first handed out. Around the same time as Corvo learns his first supernatural ability, the somewhat overpowered Blink, he is also given a clockwork heart. As this beats in his hand while equipped, it handily highlights the location of every upgrade and secret in the area with the same waypoints used for mission objectives. Even armed with this information, getting to some of them is no mean feat, and sometimes you'll need to keep the heart equipped in order to track them down, eliminating the option to use powers while you do. Pretty sneaky...



to enjoy the game. It's not an approach for everyone, mind. Old-school stealth mechanics can be cripplingly unfair, allowing you to hide in plain sight one moment while sounding the alarm the second you bat an eyelid the next, and *Dishonored* demands real patience, whether it's waiting for just the right time to Blink past a guard or giving two enemies time to finish chatting so you can slide in for a silent takedown. Waiting is a crucial aspect of the game, something worth bearing in mind if you're the kind of person who would rather be keeping their trigger finger busy.

Although the range of weapons and powers available isn't exactly huge, there's so much that you can do within the confines of this concise arsenal that it's unlikely you'll ever find yourself wanting. With creative use of two or more abilities, there's even more you can do, too – stop time when a guard fires, for instance, then possess him and move him into the path of his own bullets for a flashy, if somewhat wasteful, kill. That's something of an issue with *Dishonored*, actually – although the mechanics lend themselves to such creative takedowns brilliantly, they're nothing more than showing off when a well-placed sword blow can do the same job in a fraction of the time. Those fishing for the game's equivalent of a Silent Assassin rating especially will find that they only really use Blink, and maybe the odd Possession when the need to be a rat or a fish for a bit gets overwhelming.

With just nine main missions on offer, you'd hope for a slightly better hit rate than this. It's a slow start for the first stage as the game introduces itself, while it quickly finds its stride for the second through fifth missions, all of which are excellent. But then it starts to fall apart a little, laying on the extra guards a little thick and introducing ridiculous new enemy types that detract from the notion of this being the pure stealth game it appears, as well as breaking its own rules in the name of upping difficulty – spawning new guards in a sealed room at the sound of an alarm is a cheap trick, guys. It all winds up a little suddenly too, though at least you can go back and play the better missions again, looking to improve on your previous performance. It's a pity, then, that retreading old ground is exactly that. There's no option to go through old missions with your endgame power setup, nor is there a way to respec your abilities without starting a new game. New Game+ would result in an overpowered Corvo, clearly, but a *Hitman*-esque pre-mission loadout screen would make it far more appealing to try to go from an action playthrough to a stealthy one without having to battle against your own character build to do so.

For its soaring highs and captivating hits alone, though, *Dishonored* comes as an easy recommendation. With the *Thief* franchise stuck in a lab somewhere, having numbers spliced into its title, and *Deus Ex* still on the naughty step after *those* boss battles, Arkane has come good with arguably this generation's finest stealth title and a game so lovingly crafted that it begs to be played.



ENJOY THE SILENCE

NINTENDO'S MASCOT ALMOST FALLS FLAT

Paper Mario: Sticker Star

Right: The charming quasi-2D world of *Paper Mario*, ironically enough, looks particularly lovely in 3D.

There are few gaming characters who command such attention that the simple question 'what if he was flat?' could somehow be enough to build a four-strong spin-off sub-series. It was a stroke of genius on Nintendo's part back with the N64 original, to be fair – sprite-based characters in a 3D world offered a popular and effective solution to doing everything with polygons, though the decision to contextualise the characters' flatness was what made Nintendo's contribution that much more endearing and original. The RPG elements, too, offered a fresh take on the Mushroom Kingdom that has since been pushed and explored more thoroughly in the excellent *Mario & Luigi* games, which, in hindsight, is a little strange – it took returning Mario to being two-dimensional to make him and his world appear more three-dimensional. Ironic, if only in an Alanis Morissette sense.

But while the original was effectively a *Super Mario RPG* sequel with a clever conceit, and the last game, decent Wii title *Super Paper Mario*, returned the wafer-thin version of Nintendo's mascot to his platforming roots, *Sticker Star* doesn't seem to know which of the two directions worked better. And so it sits, noncommittal in the extreme, on the fence between the two, attempting to bridge the divide between platforming and role-playing, yet oblivious to the fact that series like *Kingdom Hearts* and even *Zelda* have already done so with far more confidence.

Structurally, *Sticker Star* wants to be a platform game. Worlds are divided up with the same kind of brief area codes that retro gamers will be used to, and while you can attempt to tackle them out of sequence, you'll seldom get far if you do. Even exploration has a classic *Mario* vibe to it, if perhaps more *3D Land* than *World* – each stage breaks down into several smaller areas to navigate in three dimensions, with all the expected gimmicks for which the franchise is so revered present and correct. But make contact with Goomba scalp and all that fades away as the turn-based combat of old awkwardly interrupts the platforming. It's here that you glance down and notice that the game's fly is undone.

While previous RPG-infused *Mario* titles have been happy to embrace genre staples such as levelling and stat management, here we see what can only really be described as a turn-based action game. Which, in itself, is no bad thing, but the game's main hook – using stickers as a kind of currency to pay for enemy deaths – sort of is. RPGs typically give us a finite stock of powerful attacks, whether through a depleting MP gauge, a spell stack or even a card-based deck. And there's usually a cost-free if weak alternative with which to do at least minor damage. Here, though, your painfully limited sticker collection is all that stands between you and getting screwed up and tossed away. The gimmick

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Intelligent Systems
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Above: Mario's range of attacks will be familiar to anyone who's played *Paper Mario* before, from the plumber's hammer to simply jumping on the heads of enemies.







Right: Stickers can be found everywhere and are presented with the same creative relish found throughout the *Paper Mario* series.

A FRIENDLY NOD TO LITTLEBIGPLANET FROM THE FRANCHISE TO WHICH SONY'S MASTERPIECE OWES ITS VERY EXISTENCE



BETTER THAN

HEROES OF RUIN



WORSE THAN

PAPER MARIO: THE THOUSAND YEAR DOOR

FAQs

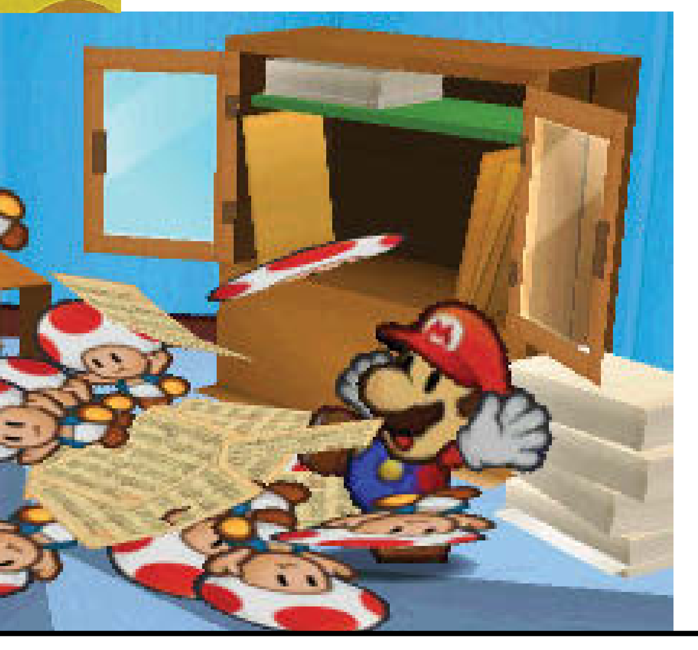
Q. WAIT… STICKERS?
Yup. Peel them off walls, grab them from enemies, buy them from the shop…

Q. IS THAT IT?
Nope. Rare objects can also be turned into powerful stickers, though these take up huge spaces in your limited album.

Q. WHAT IF I RUN OUT?
Indeed. We had several fights we had no choice but to run from on account of having no stickers, and that won't be uncommon.

STICK 'EM UP

Forget your triple-barrelled shotguns and +7 Swords of Considerable Cutting. Stickers are the weapons employed in this particular war and they're weapons you'd do well to learn early on. Generally speaking, attack stickers fall into three categories. Boots hop on the bonces of enemies in classic *Mario* style, with all kinds of variants allowing you to deal a bunch of damage to one foe or use the whole screen as your personal bouncy castle for a reduced amount of spread damage. Hammers, meanwhile, focus more on single targets, although splash damage can still strike additional enemies. And then there's the usual *Mario* power-up arsenal, largely used to deal damage to all on-screen foes. There are loads more, but these are the ones you'll use more than any other. Learn them, love them and cherish them, for they are your bread and butter.



is neat in concept but unnecessarily stressful in execution – every sticker is an expendable attack, and the finite nature of your album and sheer size of rare and powerful stickers means you'll frequently run out of general-purpose moves. Some fights therefore become overly tricky and others actually unwinnable based on what you happen to be carrying.

Stickers aren't exactly uncommon, mind you. They can be peeled off walls and floors in more or less every area of the game, though even these are randomised – sometimes you'll hit a bunch of shinies, which do more damage, but other times you'll find nothing but junk. As the game draws on, the album expands and your wealth grows extremely quickly, and sure, this offsets the earlier issues somewhat. But with sprawling dungeons to clear without a shop in sight, exercising restraint in which enemies you bother becomes increasingly important. Through hammer or feet, Mario often has an opportunity to strike first and gain the upper hand once the game pretends to be an RPG again, but even this isn't often the boon it first seems – hop on a Koopa Trooper without a jump item on hand, for instance, and you'll be faced with a shell that only serves to defend other enemies, unless you want to start using up valuable AOE stickers.

Give it a couple of hours and learn to play by its rules, though, and *Sticker Star* clearly isn't a bad game. Inventive use of paper-based locations and enemies frequently raises a smile, as does the entertaining dialogue. And once you learn to be a little less precious about shinies in order to accommodate a more versatile arsenal, even the earlier issues with brick-walling slowly fade away, leaving you to enjoy the creativity evident in every aspect of the game. Stickers and scraps can be applied to various parts of the world, though switching to the alternate view that reveals this is annoyingly drawn out, to solve simple puzzles or mend the world, a friendly nod to *LittleBigPlanet* from the franchise to which Sony's masterpiece owes its very existence. Honestly, we're welling up here.

Although it would have been nicer to see Nintendo pick one of two directions rather than offer something that perches on the fence between platforming thrills and RPG depth, *Sticker Star* is nonetheless a beautiful and eventually engrossing adventure, once it hits its stride. Its core mechanic isn't one that functions with the usual Nintendo finesse, but in the case of a company so often accused of sticking with the tried and tested, it just feels wrong to be equally critical when it leaves its comfort zone, especially when it manages to get so much else right in the process.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

GOT, GOT, NEED: Using stickers as consumable attacks is a novel conceit, and even though it could work better, the system eventually hits a comfortable stride and works pretty well.

VERDICT 7/10

JUST MANAGES TO NOT COME UNSTUCK

IT SOON BECOMES ABUNDANTLY CLEAR THAT UBISOFT'S SELF-INDULGENT FASCINATION WITH ITS OWN STORYTELLING IMPEDES THE GAMEPLAY ON A FUNDAMENTAL LEVEL

£5619

ANIMUS ONLINE

While its original inclusion may have felt shoehorned into a single-player game, multiplayer has made strides since its inception. There are a variety of modes on offer, and each has the fairly straightforward objective of tracking a target and assassinating them. It's an objective made troublesome by another player constantly stalking your whereabouts, so any movements that don't look like an AI routine will appear suspect to other players. It may contain a fair amount of progression and unlocks, but there's not a huge amount here to warrant a massive time investment. Still, it's an interesting, alternative multiplayer appendage that is worthy of your time.



FURTHER READING: A NEW FRONTIER | FEATURE | ISSUE 121 | PAGE 24

THE NEW WORLD

Assassin's Creed III

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PC, PlayStation 3, Wii U
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: Ubisoft Montreal
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-8
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Ubisoft has settled into an admirable regularity with the *Assassin's Creed* saga, but it's the first time since the second chapter that the series has undergone a major revision. It's a far cry from the iterative plodding that predates this entry, and the key to this revitalisation is the American Revolution – a more compelling, dense and grounded backdrop to the eternal Templar-Assassin conflict, but also one that can feel needlessly bloated.

That is to be expected, given Ubisoft's penchant for milking each setting dry for historical reverence, as the game transpires over the 30-odd formative years of the United States. But not content with a sequel based around a more complex narrative, driven by infamous events of the era, Ubisoft has created an open world that dwarfs its predecessors in both scale and ambition.

Through its atmosphere and meticulous faithfulness to its facsimile of 18th Century America, Ubisoft has created nothing short of the benchmark by which all other open-world games will be measured in years to come. No doubt other developers will look upon this sizeable expanse, mouths agape, and the sheer wonder of its art direction is not lost on the player either. Whether it's the critters that roam the frontier and can be skinned for profit, the snow-flecked rooftops of Boston, or the undulating waters of the Atlantic, the scenery is incomparable, even by today's lofty standards.

It's a world, stunning as it is, that the game takes a leisurely pace digging into. The first five to ten hours are spent during new protagonist Connor's (tongue-flummoxing real name: Ratonhnhaké:ton) pre-Assassin days, establishing narrative footholds in various small pockets of the game's map, and this flip-flopping around the epochs of his life come with the subtlety of a daytime soap opera. It's only once the trademark garb is ceremoniously donned, all the predictable narrative twists and turns are spelled out, and the hit list of timely villains – whose early introductions belie their later laughable pantomime wickedness – is outlined that the game finally proposes to kick-start.

But it doesn't – at least not in the manner that it should. The backbones of missions are formed by notable incidents of the age, supported by cameos that'll have historians rolling their

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

BRANCHING OUT: Treetop exploration is seamlessly integrated, but it's not quite as freeing as you'd expect and often feels slow compared to just exploring on horseback, or even on foot.

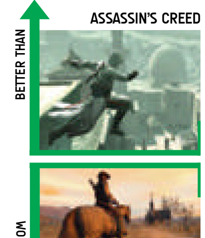
Left: Boston and New York are still relatively new settlements compared to the towns and cities of previous games, but running around on rooftops is still an immense amount of fun.

Above: Homestead missions improve relationships between Connor and local business folk. The more objectives completed, the more resources and crafting choices become available that you can use to trade in the cities. Yes, it's as boring as it sounds.



BETTER THAN

ASSASSIN'S CREED



WORSE THAN

RED DEAD REDEMPTION

Left: Connor doesn't really toe the line of moral ambiguity, as he outright supports the revolution and plays the vanguard to many of the key assaults. This mostly involves giving orders to other people, which isn't the most fun of gameplay scenarios.

eyes in derision, and it soon becomes abundantly clear that Ubisoft's self-indulgent fascination with its own storytelling impedes the gameplay on a fundamental level. One mission involves Connor taking command of three firing lines repelling the advance of Redcoats, later mounting a cannon himself to stave off a similar advance, while another sequence has him escorting Paul Revere on his famous midnight ride; each differs slightly in gameplay terms, but what they share is a lack of meaningful agency. Such missions devoid of interactivity are rife, and often everything just falls back on a blood-drenched skirmish or a ropey exit to maintain interest. But perhaps the most surprisingly dour note is how linear everything feels. Somehow Ubisoft has taken a prosperous open-world setting and made it feel like a corridor.

Assassination missions come out worst. A very precise route is often the only way to reach an enemy undetected, the game ushering players towards executing its handful of big bads in a way it has already predetermined, either with patience masquerading as strategy, or blunt assault within the game's large-scale set pieces. There was a time when *Assassin's Creed* enabled players to track targets, study routes and decide which method would prove most fruitful, but Ubisoft has reinstated the training wheels in an effort to appeal as broadly as possible. Occasionally the game decides it can't even trust the player to dispatch a target, switching to a cut-scene to finish the job and commence the victim's sanctimonious parting words. It fundamentally undermines the player's actions up until that point.

It's often these areas of fragmented gameplay and misjudged relinquishing of controls that outline the wayward focus of a developer more concerned with spinning a yarn than crafting a fulsome game. While chapters featuring Desmond have always been the least invigorating of the two timelines, one particularly ill-judged sequence has the former mixologist scaling a skyscraper, parachuting off the roof and landing on the helipad of a neighbouring tower. It sounds enjoyable enough on paper, with the game's signature parkour mechanics put to spectacular use in a modern-day setting. But as Desmond reaches the apex of the construct, the running, jumping, parachuting and landing are all interrupted by multiple cut-scenes. This is not a lone offence, as the game constantly disrupts otherwise enthralling sequences with incessant breakers, leaving a game that was once trumpeted for its fluidity feeling needlessly fractured.

But by no means should the quality of Desmond's brief chapters be a barometer of the overall worth, with Ubisoft more or less embracing their direness by appearing to commit as few resources as possible to these meandering excursions.

It's wise, given that the world inside the Animus needs as much nourishment as possible. The nascent municipalities of both Boston and New York are a staggering sight to behold, and Ubisoft has wisely cut the chaff to bolster these pockets of Colonial America with engaging side quests. The most notable are the Liberation missions, offering a wider freedom of approach as you seize forts from Redcoat control, while outside the

FAQs

Q. IS IT THE END OF DESMOND?
Weirdly, there's a lack of foreboding tension with Desmond chapters, and the end is what some might call ambiguous.

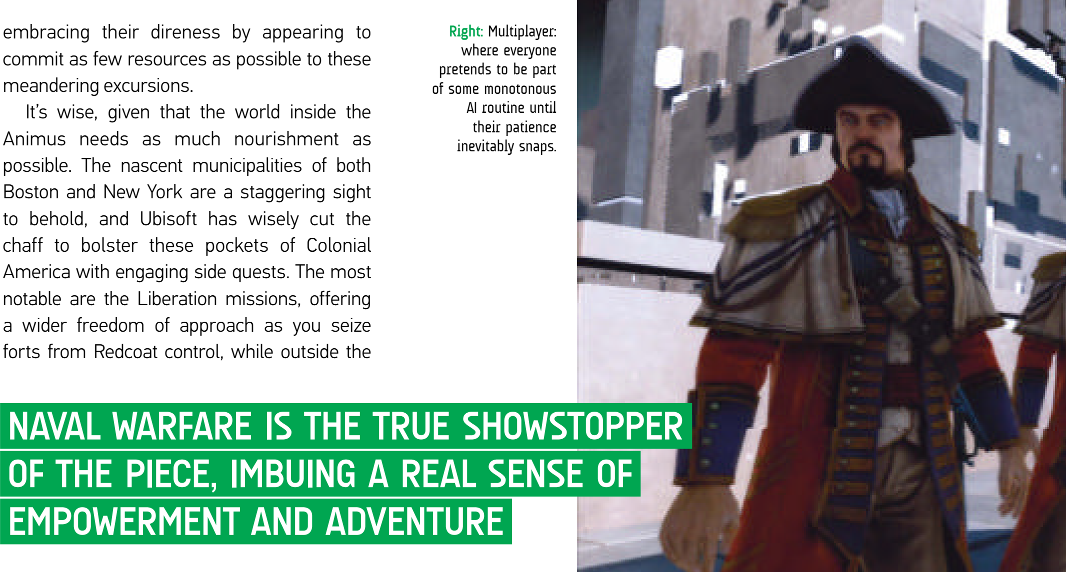
Q. HOW DOES CONNOR FARE?
He's a decent substitute for Ezio, even if he does come across like a wet blanket on occasion. Certainly the groundwork has been laid for a strong presence in a sequel.

Q. HOW'S THE HISTORY?
Mostly solid. Obviously, given that the era is better documented, there are some oversights and liberties taken, not to mention some unflattering characterisations.



Right: It doesn't seem like Ubisoft can ever get it right with Desmond. Even as his character arc reaches its conclusion, it still doesn't feel like there's the necessary urgency to sustain tension. Maybe next time.





Right: Multiplayer: where everyone pretends to be part of some monotonous AI routine until their patience inevitably snaps.

NAVAL WARFARE IS THE TRUE SHOWSTOPPER OF THE PIECE, IMBUING A REAL SENSE OF EMPOWERMENT AND ADVENTURE

Below: Some of the historical cameos are put in place to just regale Connor with stories plucked from their real-life counterparts. Benjamin Franklin is an amusing highlight, going into explicit detail about his womanising and the perks of a mature lady.



TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

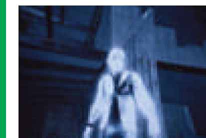
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

10 MINS



The game doesn't start how you might expect, with the opening missions exploring an interesting plot twist. We suspect that many will miss certain elements of these sequences.

5 HOURS



Even after the surprising opening, it takes some time for Connor to be initiated into the Assassin's Guild, with all manner of missions to complete before his indoctrination.

15 HOURS



After investing a significant portion of time into the game, it's all a bit easy, with assassinations usually just a quick knock on the head or an awkward QTE. More skill in future, please.

SHIP SHAPE

Sea-based warfare is the true standout among the main set of missions, and privateer side quests are an absolute joy to embark on. Controlling your hulking craft is intuitive, switching between half and full sail depending on weather and circumstance – like another ship trying to blow chunks out of your hull, for example. Combat is likewise splendid, aiming cannons at enemy vessels and doing what you can to sink them to the bottom of the ocean in a timely manner. There's certainly a sense of wonder, intrigue and adventure that the main land-based missions often feel like they're missing, and we'd be more than happy if Ubisoft decided to make a spin-off based entirely on these sequences.



main cities the Frontier offers tracking and Homestead quests that do much to paint a beguiling picture of the time.

They succeed, much like *Revelations* and the games before that, because of the diligent balance between activity and story, input and spectacle; where previously the series has been plagued with features needlessly bolted on, here is a choice crop of supplementary diversions, confidently delivering where the majority of main missions struggle.

They don't all work, of course, as Assassin's Guild side quests are an arbitrary, unfulfilling venture, much like the dutiful exploration around the dreary oubliettes located beneath the streets of Boston and New York, both of which should and most likely will be ignored. But there's a wealth of content here that stretches beyond just delivering another annual entry, as the breadth of scope branches entirely into new genres.

Naval warfare is the true showstopper of the piece, imbuing a real sense of empowerment and adventure through a series of privateer contracts that could just as well span their own entire game – which is appropriate, given the lack of character coherency with Connor.

The protagonist of *Assassin's Creed III* is portrayed as a less poised individual than the series is used to; one unsure of his abilities and own indignation, which in some respects feels like a step back from Ezio's stoic gravitas, and in others carves a figure that's more touchingly relatable. His personality has been partly reflected in his move set, the focus put on showmanship, so controls have been stripped back to further emphasise the flow of combat, with large windows to counter and little input required for the player to exterminate a whole regiment of enemy soldiers. It pales in comparison to Rocksteady's similar work on *Batman: Arkham City*, with a lack of quickfire gadgets and clear directives that enable the player to lead the attack, rather than just observe it.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

I PREDICT A RIOT: You can provoke a riot in the cities, but none of these serve a purpose. It would have been better implemented as a distraction or a way to evade pursuing soldiers.

It's indicative of Ubisoft's approach in designing this game, so wary of the player discovering their own enjoyment, or missing key information, that it so fervently handholds through what should be its most spectacular moments. At times this reduces entire chapters to tediously long treks between cut-scenes, a lot of which feel like less than worthwhile narrative additions. It's an odd occurrence of a game giving and taking away in equal measure. Moving forward, Ubisoft needs to decide what's more important, telling a story or making a game, because *Assassin's Creed III*'s attempts at either are not unreserved successes.

VERDICT 7/10

A BIG BUDGET A GREAT GAME DOES NOT MAKE

ONE OF THE VITA'S BIGGEST EXCLUSIVES TAKES THE SERIES IN NEW DIRECTIONS

Assassin's Creed III: Liberation

Above: When in Assassin mode, your notoriety is increased and you attract more attention. Be prepared to fight, or run if the odds are too great.

It's an indication of just how much faith Ubisoft has in the PS Vita that it's willing to create an entirely new *Assassin's Creed* adventure for the format. This isn't some tacked-on side quest featuring one of the franchise's established heroes, but an all-new outing built from the ground up to take advantage of the unique features of Sony's handheld. Sadly, Ubisoft's enthusiasm is largely misplaced, as *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* never soars to the heights it deserves to for a multitude of easily avoidable reasons.

Set during the same time period as *Assassin's Creed III* and boasting some neat crossover with Connor's home console adventure, *Liberation* focuses on the story of African-French heroine Aveline de Grandpré, a fledgling member of the Brotherhood of Assassins and the daughter of a former slave. The setting is arguably one of *Liberation*'s strongest elements, and during the course of her quest Aveline will face such thorny issues as racism and slavery, making it one of the first videogames to give a real insight into the history of America's slave population. Such a stance is commendable, but *Liberation* does a sloppy job of fleshing out this volatile and fascinating period of human history; the chance to address troubling elements of America's past are largely squandered or shoved aside in order to facilitate the less exciting mission assignments.

For the most part, *Liberation* manages to nail the *Assassin's Creed* feel when it comes to controls and general gameplay. Leaping from rooftop to rooftop is just as exhilarating as it is in the home console releases, and the Vita's dual-stick arrangement means that nothing is compromised when it comes to the interface. Combat retains its depth and challenge, although there are a few moments when attacks don't connect properly or the auto-targeting fails to function as it should do. On the whole, though, the developers deserve praise for managing to scale down the experience of previous *Assassin's Creed* entries for the handheld format.

Liberation's biggest innovation is its 'persona' feature. The ultimate form of concealment, the three personas in the game allow Aveline to switch from deadly Assassin to a seemingly harmless lady of leisure. There's also a slave costume, which maximises Aveline's ability to blend into the surroundings and move unseen by attentive eyes. The concept behind these costume changes is solid, but the way

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS Vita
ORIGIN: Bulgaria
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: Ubisoft Sofia
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

LIBERATION NEVER SOARS TO THE HEIGHTS IT DESERVES TO FOR A MULTITUDE OF AVOIDABLE REASONS

FAQs

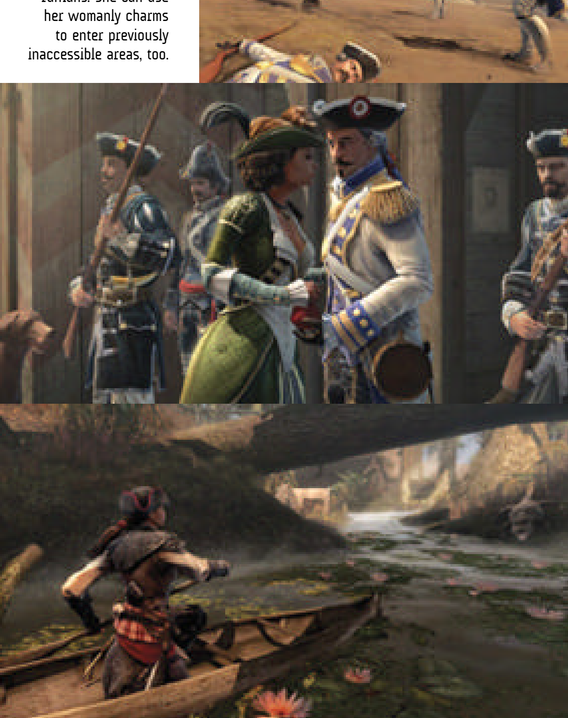
Q. IS DESMOND FEATURED THIS TIME AROUND?
Thankfully, no. Aveline's memories are part of a training program rather than being rooted in Desmond's past.

Q. DOES AVELINE BENEFIT FROM EAGLE VISION?
Absolutely. It's just as instrumental in spotting targets and clues as it ever was.

Q. WHY DOES AVELINE LOOK LIKE POP STARLET RHIANNA?
There's certainly a close resemblance to the chart-topping artist, but we're not complaining…

Below: During the course of her adventure, Aveline crosses paths with Connor, the hero of the home console version of *Assassin's Creed III*. The Vita and PS3 games can also be linked for bonus content.

Below: When dressed as a lady of leisure, Aveline is less likely to incur the wrath of the town's guards, but she will occasionally be assailed by brigands and ruffians. She can use her womanly charms to enter previously inaccessible areas, too.



in which they're deployed in the game is disappointingly cautious. Rather than allow the player to approach each mission in their persona of choice, *Liberation* forces the selection upon you. Later in the game a little more freedom is afforded, but there are numerous assignments that make you crave the opportunity to tackle your objectives in a slightly different fashion to how the developers intended.

Like so many early Vita titles, *Liberation* has an unhealthy preoccupation with making use of all of the console's unique functions, irrespective of whether or not the gameplay suffers as a result. The front and rear touch panels are used at various points, the most jarring being the opening of a letter. The mechanic is abysmal, and rather than drawing the player into the game further, it serves as a massive barrier to immersion. Other elements, such as a tilt-based mini-game and a section that uses the Vita's camera to illuminate items, are similarly botched. Hopefully, in the not too distant future, developers will realise that just because elements are present in the hardware, they don't have to be consistently used in the software.

It's obvious that a lot of effort has gone into rendering 18th Century New Orleans, and there are moments in the game – usually when you're perched atop a tall building – where it looks genuinely breathtaking. Sadly, when you're closer to the ground, which is for the majority of the game, the graphics are somewhat less striking. *Liberation* suffers from crippling frame rate problems, no doubt exacerbated by the densely populated environments and proliferation of buildings and additional elements. Other visual problems further erode the sense of immersion; it's not uncommon to witness a character skating awkwardly across the landscape, caught in some kind of spasm caused by buggy animation.

Aside from a strangely vacuous multiplayer mode, which sees you battling other players for control of a map but never actually engaging in any gameplay beyond tapping the screen, *Liberation* offers little else to keep you occupied once Aveline's mission is complete. A rudimentary attempt is made to make use of the Vita's 'Near' networking system, but it's piecemeal at best and won't interest many players.

It's a real shame that *Liberation* is saddled with so many problems, because protagonist Aveline is worthy of a better game than this. Hers is a complex and multifaceted story, which shines a light on one of America's most troubling legacies, but the game's narrative never carries through on this promise with the conviction that is required. Aveline becomes little more than a puppet, making it hard for the player to invest any kind of emotional attachment. It's a wasted opportunity to give the *Assassin's Creed* series an additional layer of historical depth, and is compounded by the technical problems and the tiresome need to incorporate Vita-specific features, which hinder rather than enrich the experience.

While Ubisoft's commitment to the Vita is to be applauded – the console is in dire need of exclusives of this calibre – *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* lacks the lavish quality of its big-screen relatives. Hardcore fans will no doubt be more forgiving and will quite rightly warm to the game's feisty heroine, but she deserves a better vehicle than this to showcase her talents.

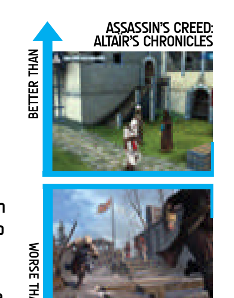
FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

UNLOCKING THE PAST: Few games are brave enough to tackle slavery or racism, but *Liberation* features both. Slaves rub shoulders with their masters, and you'll meet individuals from both camps.

PERSONA NON GRATA

Aveline's ability to change her outfit and gain different skills is one of the most interesting aspects of *Liberation*. The three personas – Assassin, slave and lady – each have their own strengths and weaknesses, allowing Aveline to take a different approach to each mission. Sadly, the player is limited in how these characters can be utilised, with most assignments forcing you to pick a certain persona rather than allowing you to experiment. It's a missed opportunity, but we sincerely hope that Ubisoft incorporates the idea into future *Assassin's Creed* titles.

BETTER THAN: ASSASSIN'S CREED: ALTAÏR'S CHRONICLES



WORSE THAN: ASSASSIN'S CREED III

VERDICT 6/10
AN AMBITIOUS BUT ULTIMATELY FLAWED VENTURE

THE MORALITY OF BORE

Medal Of Honor: Warfighter

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 3
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Xbox 360
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Electronic Arts
DEVELOPER: Danger Close
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-20
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

AS GOOD AS
TURNING POINT: FALL OF LIBERTY

WORSE THAN
BATTLEFIELD 3

***Medal Of Honor* has become indoctrinated.** Danger Close rounds up the most prominent military shooter clichés, throws together a weak ideology, and leads players into battle with a disheartening sense of jingoism. You are a Tier 1 operative who will single-handedly reclaim American pride from the clutches of terrorism. Such propaganda could turn a thoughtful man into a robotic killing machine. It could also provide the basis for the slaughter one of the genre's most historic franchises.

Warfighter's name says an awful lot about the developer's ambition. The game could have been called *Gunslinger*, *Bulletshooter*, or even *Doorbreacher*. Rest assured, you will breach a lot of doors. First impressions are vital. Ambition for the game dropped as soon as the subtitle was announced. We've somehow gone from stunning re-creations of *Saving Private Ryan* to throwaway snippets depicting the War on Terror. In its second outing as a modern shooter, this former leader buffs up, loses its personality, and makes DICE's Frostbite 2 engine feel like a bumbling war veteran.

Back to those door breaches. Every assault must challenge your ability to get through wood. Whether you kick, crowbar or tomahawk your way through, get used to entering rooms in dramatic slow motion. Behind every door lies yet another room or corridor. Each linear route seems to have had an effect on the sanity of the game's AI, with many sprinting towards cover, only to change their mind at the last second. You can sit back and splatter the enemy's skull as he flits between two identical barricades.

Others feel so attached to their fallen comrades that they must endure a similar death. When one body falls, another often staggers into view. Trampling the dead obviously isn't frowned upon outside the States, as your foes make a human barricade out of their deceased brothers. You'll quickly understand where the opposition is going to



Above: Your pals will provide the customary hand to pull you up when things get tough. These actions are even edgier with a beard.

Below: Frostbite 2 makes for some stunning screenshots. It's a shame the action isn't quite so pretty when in motion.

FAQs

Q. SHOULD I BRING A PASSPORT?
Expect to visit Pakistan, Somalia and the Philippines during the campaign. Not that any of them look different.

Q. WHO DO I PLAY AS?
Preacher returns from the previous game. You'll also spend time as the lovingly named Stump.

Q. CAN I PLAY WITH FRIENDS?
Co-op isn't included. A multiplayer buddy system helps link you with your pals.

Below: We fully recommend you turn the brightness right up. *Warfighter*'s darkest sections will have you firing blind.



WHETHER YOU KICK, CROWBAR OR TOMAHAWK YOUR WAY THROUGH, GET USED TO ENTERING ROOMS IN DRAMATIC SLOW MOTION

hide, making *Warfighter*'s gun battles rather bland from the outset.

It doesn't help that the game's campaign is stuffed with a generic filling. The majority of the single-player is spent firing various types of machine gun and initiating peek-a-boo tactics from cover. Sniper sections break up the monotony, with one scene forcing you to consider bullet trajectory over a great distance. Unfortunately, your shots will always hit if you aim slightly higher than the target's head. This is one example of mechanics never being explained. The developer knows you've experienced similar levels before and doesn't intend on engaging players with new ideas.

Away from predictable firefights and door breaches, *Warfighter* rarely tries to do things differently. The most interesting side notes come in the form of driving interludes, where you take control of a speeding car in chase or escape scenes; ploughing around corners and into oncoming traffic is exhilarating, albeit short-lived. Things are mixed up in the latter stages, in which you'll be forced to outwit enemies by hiding in the shadows. It's tense and well implemented. Imagine *Pac-Man* in the world of *Need For Speed: Hot Pursuit* and you'll see the potential.

This promise never develops into a significant amount of enjoyment. You'll take the helicopter rides, man the powerful guns, and use remote-controlled cars to your advantage, but then originality is dismissed the moment you realise the enemy's answer to everything is a rocket-propelled grenade. That's how the modern FPS works, right?

The lack of ideas could be accepted if *Warfighter* ran smoothly. Instead, plenty of bizarre bugs make leniency difficult. Your sight will flicker on and off when hidden behind cover, almost as if objects keep poking you straight in the retina. Guns float in the air, jagged edges halt your progress, and your squadmates increase the chance of death through stupidity, such as their ability to push you from cover with their knees. You won't notice when looking down the sight of your gun, and are only likely to spot what's happened when you start getting riddled with bullets.

The same comrades sometimes decide they can't be bothered to fight, and will sit behind the battle with little more than a confused grimace on their face. Expect them to fire inaccurately throughout. Even as part of a squad, you're a lone wolf. A one-man tide-changer who employs human sponges for cover.

A measly campaign doesn't warrant a return once the five hours are up. Multiplayer modes offer the token TDM and CTF variants, but there's nothing here to get excited about if you've spent the last year playing *Battlefield 3*. It's fair to say online play is adequate, but the game's lack of personality and tough competition ensures this won't hold your attention for long.

Danger Close has provided nothing more than a stopgap until *Battlefield 4*; as if a military shooter was needed this year, so anything would do. Such an approach could prove damaging in the long run. Frostbite 2 appears creaky at best and broken at worst, its ability to create stunning set pieces remaining undoubted but the technical side not quite adding up. This game is riddled with irritating tics and inconsistencies.

Warfighter is the type of game that would enjoy eating rum and raisin ice cream, wearing brown shoes and listening to Coldplay. It dons a Justin Bieber side sweep in an attempt to fit in, while underneath its delicate mop resides a shaven-headed man's man who has nothing new or intelligent to say. This title may look the part, but there's a lack of activity between the ears – an inescapable blandness that cripples everything the game has to say. The overwhelming patriotism, sense of chauvinistic values and incompetent AI round off one of the year's most disappointing releases.

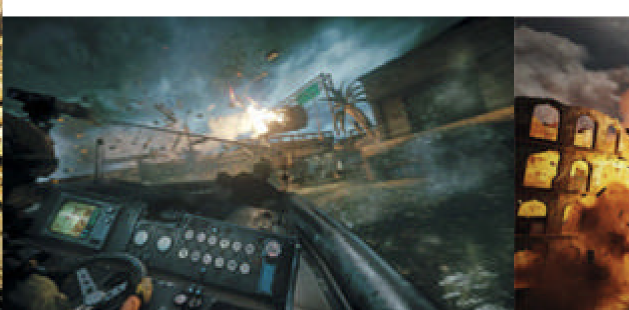
MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

GUNS, GUNS, GUNS: Some interesting weapons would really spice things up. The continuous thud of standard machine gun A or B for hour after hour drains life from the soul.

HONEY, I'M GOING TO BE LATE

Warfighter tries to represent the morality of war through cut-scenes. Expect wives who threaten to leave, emotionless daughters, and a dinner meeting interrupted by a vital mission. Each domestic flashback is so cheesy that it loses any profound effect, not helped by wooden characters that are never developed beyond 'man' and 'wife'. Dialogue is similarly clichéd, pieced together from the trimmings of terrible films and often appearing humorous rather than emotional. If you want to experience the terrors of war, play *Spec Ops: The Line*.





VERDICT 4/10
AIMS FOR HOLLYWOOD, LANDS ON SYFY

A GAME THAT LIVES UP TO ITS TITLE

Need For Speed: Most Wanted*

Reboots have been hip this gen. *Devil May Cry*, *Tomb Raider* and *SSX* are a few recent examples of publishers trying to twist familiar IP in new directions to match the latest trends in gaming and what they think people want. But *Need For Speed: Most Wanted* is unusual in that it's a reboot of a current-gen game.

Yet further examination shows *Most Wanted* circa 2012 doesn't so much reboot *Most Wanted* circa 2005 as obliterates it. The two games have almost nothing in common. Everything that defined *Most Wanted* when it bounced onto shelves alongside the Xbox 360 launch – graffiti stylings, muted colours, appearances by model Josie Maran – is absent here. This is Criterion's game through and through.

This new *Need For Speed: Most Wanted* sits between *Burnout Paradise* and *Hot Pursuit*, combining the eager exploration of the former with the dramatic police chases of the latter. The idea is that you build up your car by completing challenges throughout the city, unlocking mods such as nitrous boost and sturdier bodies, allowing you to customise as you go. Other cars can be found dotted around the city and you can use those too, completing their challenges for further mods. Almost everything you do counts towards your overall points. This is perhaps the only thing that the 2012 and 2005 versions of this game have in common – earning the right to challenge the Most Wanted cars and ticking them off your list as they fall one by one.

That's the detailed explanation, but you can also completely ignore the structure and drive around the city, picking and choosing whatever activity catches your interest. *Most Wanted* is a remarkably passive tutor. Beyond the initial here's-how-to-play whistle-stop tour of the city, it lets you get on with things without ever interfering and, remarkably, you never feel as though any guidance is needed.

It gets away with this for three reasons. The first is that the difficulty level in *Most Wanted* caters for players of all skill levels, offering a variety of challenges that range from easy checkpoint drives to endurance tests as you try to outrun the police.

The second is the interface. When you're in-game, you're in-game. There's no need to pause or cut away to another menu, as all the options you need can be called up via menus as you race. Customising, changing cars, picking events, retrying races… Everything is done with a few taps of the D-pad. It's a remarkably simple idea but one that helps the flow of *Most Wanted* immeasurably, and besides a few frustrations – not being able to restart races immediately until the 'race failed' screen passes, for example – it does make you wonder why it's never been done before.

The third, and perhaps the most important, is Autolog. Its introduction in *Need For Speed:*

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

EVEN MORE WANTED: While 2005's *Need For Speed: Most Wanted* was a good game, *Most Wanted* 2012 easily trumps it with Autolog, more challenges, better handling and more personality.

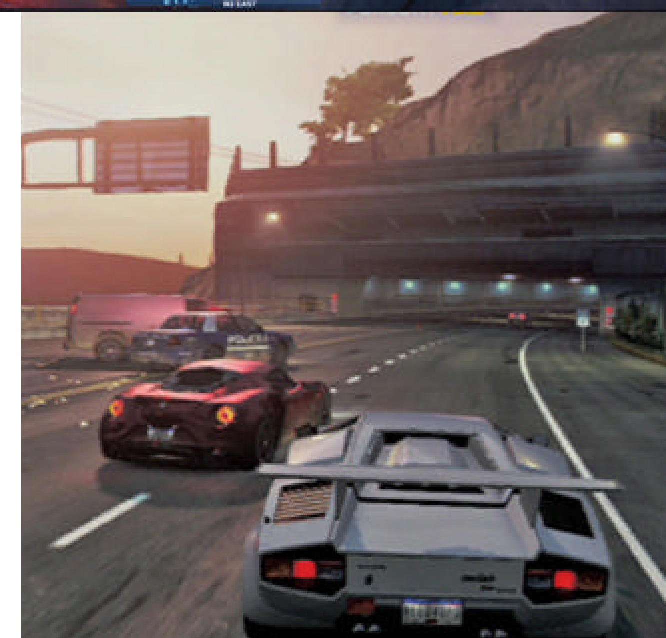
DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PC, PS3
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: EA
DEVELOPER: Criterion
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-8
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



Above: Roadblocks have small gaps you can aim through, but as your Wanted level increases, these disappear. Eventually, you'll have to try to smash through SWAT vans…

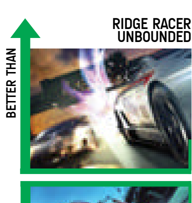






BETTER THAN

RIDGE RACER UNBOUNDED





AS GOOD AS

BURNOUT PARADISE

Leftt: Each area of the city has its own personality and character, which makes it easy to learn your way around and know exactly where you are.

UNLOCKING THE PATH

Perhaps the only real hint of defined structure is the challenges that come with each car you find around the city. The first challenge is the easiest and usually unlocks nitrous boost, which makes subsequent challenges much easier. Even so, it's not necessary and we just about managed to complete the first few *Most Wanted* races with cars that didn't have any boost. Ultimately, though, working your way through unlocks and building up parts for your car is fun, and in the same way that *Borderlands 2* makes it hard to part with a favoured weapon, *Most Wanted* has the same effect on you and the cars you earn.

Left: When you find cars with the manufacturer's badge, that means you can jump in the car and play the extra challenges. Cars aren't always an upgrade on what you already have, though.

MOST WANTED CIRCA 2012 DOESN'T SO MUCH REBOOT MOST WANTED CIRCA 2005 AS OBLITERATES IT

Hot Pursuit was smart, essentially filling the road with in-game leaderboards for you to track and keep your eye on. *Most Wanted* seems to have been built entirely with Autolog in mind – the whole city is rammed with leaderboards and challenges, seamlessly woven into the fabric of the metropolis without feeling obtrusive or unnecessary. It's why *Most Wanted* 2012 can get away with not having a story driving you along. Instead of an overarching narrative to propel you forward, you have hundreds of smaller, compelling challenges instead. Given the enormous size of this game, both in scope and content, there are plenty of those mini-challenges too.

The handling has a nice weight to it, although there's now a slight hint of *OutRun* and *Ridge Racer* in the feel of things. Tapping brake while turning into corners sends you drifting with ease, as you control how shallow or deep into the turn you are as your car glides over the tarmac. It's an unusually arcade-like nod yet it fits perfectly, the dramatic powerslides slotting in neatly alongside the sense of speed and giving you the tools you need to make police chases feel exciting and empowering. The handling isn't quite snappy enough for last-minute swerves out of the way of spike strips or sudden roadblocks, but these are both signalled far in advance as you approach. There's little to get frustrated or annoyed at here, little to get in the way of you having fun and enjoying yourself.

FAQs

Q. HOW DO YOU UNLOCK CARS?
You find them parked throughout the city. Just drive up to the car and press Y to take control and get new challenges.

Q. HOW BIG IS MOST WANTED?
Huge. The city feels as big as *Burnout Paradise* but with fewer redundant areas, such as the mountainside in *Paradise*. There are also more challenges here.

Q. WHAT'S THE SOUNDTRACK LIKE?
A mixture of electro and rock, including *Bonkers* by Dizzee Rascal. Mercifully, right bumper allows you to skip tracks.

In theory, racing games seem like a genre that allows little room for developers to stamp their own personality and individuality without drifting too far from grounded realism, yet this is undeniably a Criterion game. The blazing orange sunset that almost blinds you as you powerslide around corners. The sophisticated classiness of the UI. The weight to each car and shower of sparks when metal rubs against metal. Even the city, which soon becomes familiar thanks to the character and personality each area has. Everything has its place. *Most Wanted* might not have the same high concept that *The Run* did, but this is infinitely more memorable.

You could argue that the crashes don't match the drama of the chase, the camera angles often failing to relay the complete destruction of your vehicle. The handling might feel a little too forced towards the arcade side of things, and perhaps some players will feel that they've played this game already thanks to the many hours they put into *Burnout Paradise*. But there's no denying that Criterion is the master of its craft, and *Most Wanted* is its biggest and best effort yet.

VERDICT 9/10
THE BEST REBOOT WE'VE SEEN THIS GEN, BAR NONE

MAY THE HORSE BE WITH YOU

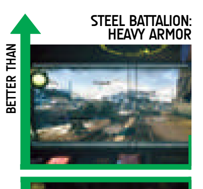
Fable: The Journey

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Microsoft
DEVELOPER: Lionhead Studios
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

STEEL BATTALION: HEAVY ARMOR





DEAD SPACE: EXTRACTION

WORSE THAN

There's an observable cycle with *Fable* games that we've all grown very familiar with by now: promises are made, promises are broken, fans are upset, rinse, repeat. Even with this Kinect spin-off the cycle remains unbroken. Peter Molyneux, still struggling to exercise self-restraint when it comes to promoting his games, followed last year's terribly wooden E3 showing of this latest instalment by declaring he wanted to "state on record now that *Fable: The Journey* is definitely not on-rails".

Predictably, this title is very much on-rails, the only possible direction in the unwaveringly linear adventure being forward. At this rate, the "life-changing" centre of *Curiosity*'s cube is likely going to be filled with photos of Molyneux's old socks.

There is some player-controlled navigation in *The Journey*, but not a great deal. It's located in the half of the game spent in the driver's perch of a horse-drawn carriage, where each snap of the reins with a quick motion of your arms sees your horse, Seren, go from a trot, then to a canter, then a full-on gallop. Moving one arm in and the other out controls the steering, much as it does in *Kinect Star Wars*' podracing, except here the far slower speeds and narrow roads make it half as exciting. Some sections, such as where the player is pursued by a chaotic force named the Devourer and must steer the cumbersome carriage at full speed, hint at the possibility of a faster and more entertaining experience, but *Fable: The Journey* never delivers on this potential.

The second half of the game, in which Theon Greyjoy soundalike Gabriel dismounts from his carriage and progresses on foot, takes place entirely on-rails, with the only control the player has being the direction in which they cast magical attacks.

It's a bit like *Virtua Cop* but without the peripheral, which coincidentally makes for a far less enjoyable experience. Gabriel has a set of magical gauntlets that, by the end of the



Above: By the end of the game, you'll have access to several spells, some of which are voice-activated, others that are hurled as if they were javelins, and some that are little more than upgrades to existing powers.

Below: There are some on-rails sections that see you blast enemies from the back of your cart, and it's usually during these that Kinect's accuracy falters most.

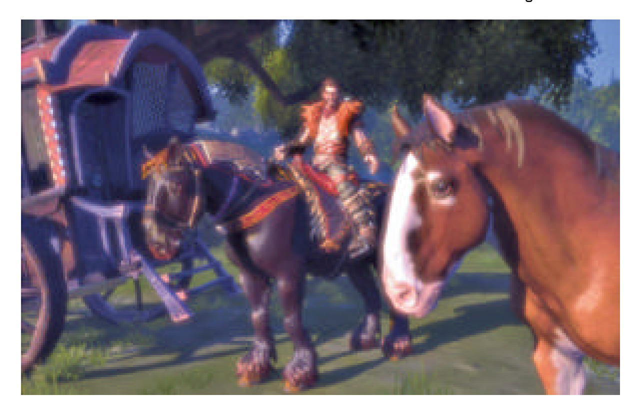
FAQs

Q. HOW ELSE IS KINECT USED?
You'll sometimes need to pull open doors or use pumps to fill a trough with water. You can also use the voice recognition to select spells or soothe your horse.

Q. IS THIS REALLY A FABLE GAME?
There are plenty of familiar enemies and characters – Zoe Wanamaker reprises her role as Theresa – and Albion is as recognisable as ever. But by and large, no, it's not.

Q. IS IT FUNNY, AT LEAST?
Try as they might to inject the script with a playful sense of humour, the puns and awful one-liners delivered here are a far cry from the daft, witty banter of *Fable II*.

Below: At occasional rest stops you can pet Seren, feed him apples, pour him water, or heal his wounds using the magical abilities of Gabriel's gauntlets.



STRONG AS A HORSE

It wouldn't be *Fable* if you weren't levelling up in some way. In *The Journey*, you collect the series' usual green, red and blue gems during combat or when steering your steed – the latter two requiring a sprint or a slow trot to be obtained. Collect enough of these small orbs and you'll obtain a token that can then be used to unlock new spells and progress through a very simple skill tree. The abilities that bolster your attack power and overall health are most useful, making you feel increasingly powerful as you plod through the main adventure, but the upgrades for your horse are less so. They're rather useless when all's said and done, and are best left ignored.

FABLE: THE JOURNEY IS VERY MUCH ON-RAILS, THE ONLY POSSIBLE DIRECTION IN THE UNWAVERINGLY LINEAR ADVENTURE BEING FORWARD

game, allow him to cast five different spells, the right hand able to arc out spells such as fizzling sparks of blue energy or spears of stone that shatter into shards once cast. The left hand controls a lasso of green energy that snares enemies and enables the player to throw them over edges or up into the air with a second flick of the wrist.

As Gabriel tidily positions himself around levels, you'll take on swarms of Hobbes, Balverines and Hollow Men, using tricks such as directing the path of a misfired bolt while it's in midair, or yanking shields from an enemy's grasp before following up with a secondary blow. The occasional boss fights in particular require various skills used in conjunction with one another, making for some of the most engaging moments of the game.

Nevertheless, *Fable: The Journey* is passably entertaining at best, irksome at worst. While never threatening the same lack of sensitivity as the hopelessly bad *Steel Battalion: Heavy Armor* did earlier this year, *Fable: The Journey* still offers a less-than-perfect Kinect experience, with many of your thrown spells launching off in the opposite direction intended or sometimes failing to cast at all. It's a complaint we're very used to hearing of Kinect by now, but once again you will find yourself flailing frantically at the screen throughout your time with the game, finding luck more reliable than skill in progressing from one combat encounter to the next.

In a single-player that lasts up to eight hours, the repetitiveness of the game design and frustrations with Kinect can make for an experience that's more of a chore than a challenge. Variety is attempted in optional off-the-beaten-track sections that usually offer little more than a chest with a dull and worthless collectable inside, and there are stables where you can stroke, feed and heal your horse as if it were a virtual pet for extra experience points. However, they do little to remedy the malaise that sets in quickly and never fully dissipates.

It would be even worse if it weren't for the redeeming feature that is *The Journey*'s setting. Like a prettier, chunkier and more colourful version of Skyrim, the bucolic fields and dense woodland of Albion are better presented here than ever before in the series. Now running on Unreal Engine 3 instead of Lionhead's proprietary technology, *Fable: The Journey* hosts a cartoon world that's a pleasure to inhabit, from sun-drenched panoramas to the dark blues and greys of uncharted cave systems.

It's a clichéd word to pull out of the bag when discussing games, but *Fable: The Journey* does exude charm from its world and characters. Even though they're poorly written, the new performance-captured animations and earnest voice acting make the various personalities you meet along the way something to be savoured in an otherwise bland adventure. We mentioned *Virtua Cop* earlier, but perhaps, in many ways, *Dead Space: Extraction* is the better comparison. One may be a blood-soaked horror and the other a whimsical fairytale that – have no doubt – is aimed at kids, but both use the on-rails template to weave new and interesting stories from otherwise familiar worlds, and they both do that very well.

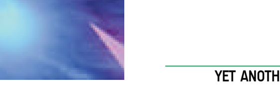
Nevertheless, *Dead Space: Extraction* at least had the Wii Remote. *Fable: The Journey* only has Kinect, and once again it's too unresponsive, too fiddly and too annoying to carve a genuinely enjoyable experience out of Albion. Whether *The Journey* was a labour of love or a contractual obligation matters little; when all's said and done, the only thing that matters is that this feels like another nail in the coffin for this generation's version of Kinect – and perhaps even its last.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

ONE-TRACK MIND: We don't have a problem with on-rails shooters, but *The Journey* is more Tube ride than rollercoaster, failing to mix things up enough to make the linearity anything other than a hindrance.







VERDICT 5/10

YET ANOTHER KINECT-CONTROLLED DISAPPOINTMENT

REDEFINING COMMERCIALISM

Forza Horizon

***Forza Horizon* could so easily have been just another also-ran in the ongoing competition to see who can produce the most culturally immature racing title there is.** Like *Need For Speed: ProStreet*, *DiRT 2* and others, it seems to think that racing games fall short of the mark when merely indulging players in the fantasy of driving fast cars, and so attempts to indulge them in all kinds of others. It's not an also-ran. It's the outright winner.

It thinks it knows what those fantasies are. What *your* fantasies are. You like fast cars, right? Well, you bought the game. "So," it says. "Let's pretend for a moment you're not Ian Jenkins, part-time scaffolder from Staines. Let's pretend you're a Levi's model, a racing wunderkind over whom the Horizon Festival's obligatory bimbo would already have melted were it not for a stray wisp of fabric holding it all in." That's your fantasy, right? Sure it is. *Forza Horizon* knows you.

It extrapolates, each deduction leading on to the next. "If you like pouting booth babes sticking their bits through the window of your throbbing, yellow penis substitute," it says, "would it not be a fair assumption that you also have the worst taste in music in the history of mankind?" Of course it would, and so it offers not one, but three whole radio stations, and listening to any of them is rather like having a clumsy child squeeze the pus from a set of suppurating ear wounds.

Then there's the story. Of course, it's arguable whether you need a story at all in a racing title. If it's to provide an emotional connection with the protag – which is what stories do – it fails, because in stories we're supposed to sympathise with him. How exactly are we meant to sympathise with a reckless immortal whose handsomeness makes Brad Pitt look fugly, who owns all the cars in the world, and whose idea of a good time is to drive along public highways at 200mph in a car made from indestructible adamantium? We can't.

Which puts argument for a narrative on very shaky ground, but really the only story possible

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Microsoft
DEVELOPER: Playground Games
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-8
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Below: The bosses are a collection of stereotypical 'characters', each possessing one dominating trait. Their cars may be technically maxed out, for example, but the thing they have in common is they're all idiots.





FAQs

Q. BETTER THAN FORZA MOTORSPORT 4?
No. Different. Everyone should give it a chance, if not purely because the driving itself is so damn good.

Q. CAN I FIX THE MUSIC?
You can turn it off. If you drive with manual gears, you'll need at least to turn it way down to hear the engine note.

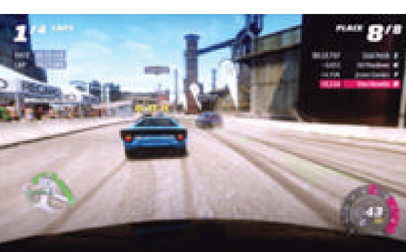
Q. THIS OR NFS: MOST WANTED?
Like two delicious varieties of cheese, you'll want them both.



ALL THAT STYLISTIC HOT AIR BECOMES INVISIBLE WHEN YOU'RE BEHIND THE WHEEL







Left: Building a garage of cars is easy; collecting one or two you love in each class will take time, though. The sense of ownership is there from *Forza Motorsport*, but without the tuning options it's slightly less tangible.

BETTER THAN

NEED FOR SPEED: PROSTREET



WORSE THAN

FORZA MOTORSPORT 4

in a game like *Forza Horizon* is 'bloke goes to racing event and beats a bunch of trash-talking wise-asses, then goes home with all the cars in the world, all the money in the world, and under his arm the aforementioned bimbo who, of course, wasn't interested at first, only now that he's thrown his V8 glans around some corners a bit quicker than everybody else can't get enough of him'.

Naturally, if you are the person to whom these fantasies apply, the slice of immature boyhood that *Forza Horizon* supposes you to be, fear not; you're 14 years old and that's all perfectly normal. You've yet to develop things like a mature attitude to gender or a taste in music that extends beyond what hisses and clicks from the incompetent speaker of a Nokia 7650.

The truth is that if you're that person, we kind of envy you, because in *Forza Horizon* you get to enjoy what is otherwise an almost incomprehensibly brilliant racer without entire muscle groups entering full spasm as *Iron Deer Dream (Chad Valley Remix)*, blats, blips and flatulates from a radio whose default setting is 'louder than thought'.

But the Horizon Festival itself actually has a purpose beyond providing a background to the inconsequential dudebro storyline. It's a central hub; a place where you can buy cars, upgrade them, paint them, join car clubs and collect the wristbands whose ascending colours unlock the world's increasingly difficult events. The locations of these range all over, and Playground Games has been astute when it comes to allotting the world its miserly handful of fast-travel points. It wants you to drive to the events, and if there happens to be a fast-travel point nearby, it'll even charge you serious money to use it. This is fine. You'll want to drive, because the driving itself is just that good.

The world, like the cars, is gorgeous. Visually, *Forza Horizon* is up there with the best-looking racers ever created. Not bad for a piece of hardware now a full seven years of age. Much has been said by both Turn 10 and Playground Games on the subject of keeping *Forza Motorsport*'s much-lauded physics engine intact, and that feels half achieved. Certainly, the handling – especially on a wheel – feels immediate and natural, but any long-time *Forza* player will be able to tell you it's more forgiving. It's the same physics engine all right, but it's not been set up the same way. And with roads that are, for the most part, built more for speed than they are technical cornering, it doesn't feel like the same experience. That's not a bad thing. This is, after all, a different game.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

IN THE FAMILY: It may sound odd, but what makes *Forza Horizon* unique is the thing that shouldn't. It's its *Forza* heritage, the complex physics representing technical brilliance beneath its more arcadey veneer.

Like many non-racing open-worlders, there is a hell of a lot to see and do in *Forza Horizon*, and the temptation to see and do it all is a strong one. The process of visiting events, beating them, unlocking more, and taking on what are essentially side quests in the form of Street Races, where corner-cutting and ramming are positively encouraged; Showcase Events where you race against planes, helicopters and so on; and Rival Events, which pit you against a 'boss' to win his car, is a highly satisfying one.

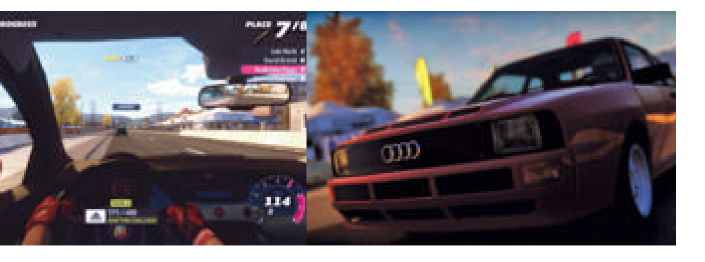
Forza Horizon is the upstart son to the main *Forza Motorsport* series. It is brash, immature and petulant. It feels like the very stuff it's made of is market research. Of focus groups populated by teenage boys with attention deficits so severe they need giant, electric-pink fonts to whoosh and clank and screech about the screen while incoherent electronica wubs gaily along. The problem for us critics is all that stylistic hot air becomes invisible when you're behind the wheel. Because *Forza Horizon* has its father's DNA, and to drive it is never anything less than pure joy.



VERDICT 8/10

TOO MUCH STYLE, BUT ALSO PLENTY OF SUBSTANCE

Left: Night races are plenty pretty, especially when the sun is going down. Driving a race at 200mph with traffic on the road, however, as one of the boss races dictates, involves far more luck than judgement.



RIVALRY

One aspect of *Forza Horizon* we feel we must tip our hat to is the way it implements the Rivals system – basically a way of competing for the best times with those on your friends list or, failing that, a stranger close to you on the worldwide leaderboard. It's one of the best implementations of an increasingly popular means to cultivate rivalries with friends, even when not playing competitively. After each race, the option appears to go head to head with somebody who posted a faster time than you, then you race their ghost. That's it. One button, a quick race and the integrity of your electronic online wing-wang is back in order. Praise the day!

BRIAN PROVINCIANO'S LOVE LETTER TO THE EIGHTIES HAS THE GAMEPLAY TO BACK IT UP

Retro City Rampage

We were beginning to think that *Retro City Rampage* might never come out. Brian Provinciano's epic tribute to the Eighties and Nineties first appeared in 2002, when he intended to create an homage to *Grand Theft Auto III* on Nintendo's NES. As it was announced for more and more systems, we had fears that the game may have broken its talented developer, who, delightful chiptunes aside, was in charge of every aspect of *Rampage*'s development, from design to PR. *Retro City Rampage* is finally here, however, and we needn't have worried.

From the moment you lay eyes on its meticulously detailed graphics, you know that *Retro City Rampage* is a labour of love that never compromises – sometimes to the detriment of the game – its original vision. The pulsating 8-bit heart of Theftropolis takes inspiration from *Grand Theft Auto*'s Liberty City. Sure, the layout is completely different, but there's no mistaking the fact that Provinciano's game is deeply grounded in DMA's world-changing release. Dig deeper, however, and you soon realise that *Grand Theft Auto* is the tip of an eclectic iceberg of gaming styles that lovingly parodies everything from Midway's *Tapper* to Konami's *Metal Gear*.

While the core gameplay of *Retro City Rampage* revolves around a number of typical *GTA* missions that range from trailing cars to boosting vehicles and going on murderous rampages, Provinciano has also woven in other gameplay styles.

One mission sees you delivering newspapers, *Paperboy*-style, while another requires you to sneak past guards in a tribute to *Metal Gear*. Certain stages take on the guise of *Smash TV*, complete with authentic twin-stick controls, and others re-create the sewer section of Konami's *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* beat-'em-up, or have you trying to overload a system by chucking batteries at it, in the style of *Tapper*. They don't always work as well as they could, due to them all using *Rampage*'s core control system, which can be a little too stiff, but whenever they do crop up they make a welcome change from the *GTA* mechanics that start to drag *Rampage* down in its latter half.

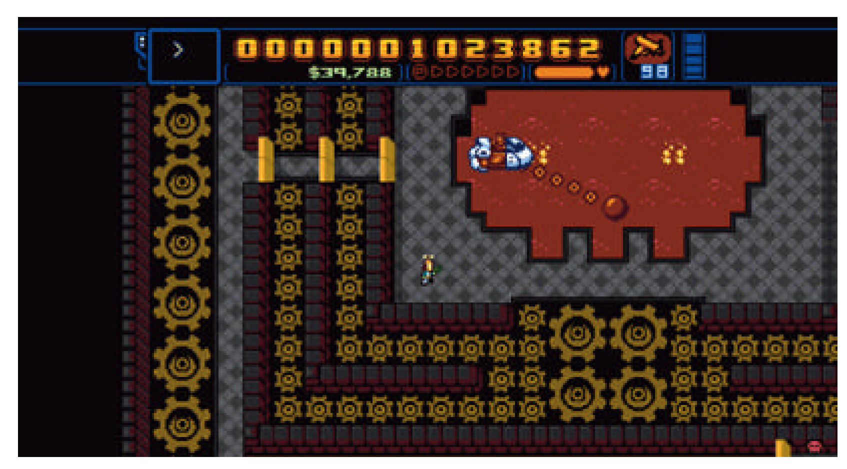
While the varied gameplay is highly entertaining and goes a long way towards keeping *Retro City Rampage* fresh and exciting as you work through its 60-plus missions, it's the mind-boggling number of nods to the Eighties and Nineties that will first grab your attention.

Within the first 30 minutes you'll receive a speedy power-up from the Green Hill Zone, beat up the Turtles and the A-Team, nick Bill and Ted's time machine, jump down a *Mario*-styled pipe, hop across *Pitfall!* crocodiles, battle Bionic Commando and nearly get run over by Doc Brown's DeLorean. The sight gags come fast and furious, and cover everything from *Frogger* and *Mega Man 2* to *Elevator*

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PS3, PS Vita, Wii, Xbox 360
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Vblank Entertainment
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £11.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows XP, 1GHz processor, 128MB RAM, Pixel Shader 2.0 and Vertex Shader 2.0, 50MB HDD space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Right: *Retro City Rampage* re-creates many classic games, but its nod to *Metal Gear* is easily one of our favourites. The stealth-based sections are used a number of times and are well suited to *Rampage*'s tight controls.



Above: Lots of videogame heroes and villains turn up as *Retro City Rampage* progresses. By far the most annoying is Dr Robotnik lookalike Buttnick, who proves incredibly tough to kill. Sadly, these difficulty spikes pop up quite regularly in the latter half.

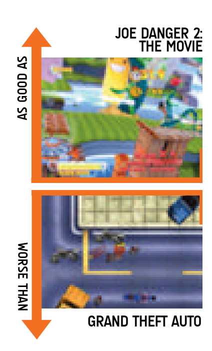


Above right: The many cut-scenes in *Retro City Rampage* are superb, easily highlighting the wonderful pixel work that Provinciano has been crafting for the past ten years.

Above: The chiptunes that accompany your shenanigans in Theftropolis subtly mimic classic tunes through a great mix courtesy of Leonard J Paul, Matthew Creamer and Jake Kaufman.

AN AMAZING AWARENESS OF POP CULTURE AND THE ABILITY TO GRAFT MODERN GAME MECHANICS TO 8-BIT TEMPLATES





FAQs

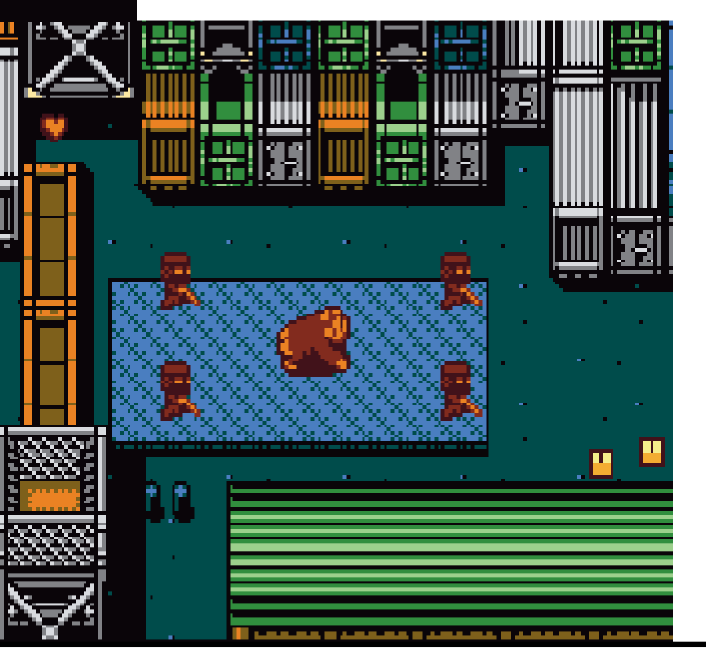
Q. SO WHAT VERSION SHOULD I GET?
We prefer the Vita outing, as the structure makes it ideally suited for gaming on the move.

Q. WHAT INDIE GAMES ARE AVAILABLE, THEN?
So far we've found a cut-down version of *Bit.Trip Runner* and a cool Virtual Boy offering featuring *Super Meat Boy*.

Q. ANY REPLAY VALUE?
Certainly. It's packed with all manner of challenges, while free-roaming mode lets you enjoy the city of Theftropolis at your leisure.

CITY OF OPPORTUNITY

It's a shame that the city of Theftropolis is such a pain to navigate, because there's so much to actually do in it. You can get plastic surgery, effectively changing your face to that of a number of recognisable US games journalists, at MJ's, or change your mullet for something slicker. A large number of weapons can be purchased from Major Lee's Ammo Gun Co, or you can simply respray your car to avoid cops whenever the heat gets too much. You can purchase bikes from Bug Eyes Louie, buy skateboards from the Skate & Buy, and even get a temporary job with the Go Go Busters. Best of all is Nolan's Arcade, which features a variety of fun mini-games to play.



Action and *Duck Hunt*. In fact, they hit so fast that it's nearly impossible to get all the references on your first play.

The upside to the scattershot approach is that you'll often find yourself grinning from ear to ear when you have to pick up a bike and realise that you're purchasing it from *Punch-Out!!*'s Doc Louis, or work out that the Snake-inspired Major Lee is a reference to *The Fall Guy*. The downside is that it's going to be absolutely pointless to anyone not well versed in Eighties lore.

Even if your knowledge of the period is limited, though, it should be enough to follow *Rampage*'s story, which riffs rather heavily on that stalwart of Eighties nostalgia pieces, *Back To The Future*. After trashing Doc Choc's car in 2012, Player, as your character is known, must find a way to get back to his own time. It's an admittedly slight conceit that's fuelled by its funny central plot, which cheekily takes swipes at the big publishers who steal ideas from indie developers. It's told with tongue firmly in cheek, as after all, this very game gleefully steals from all manner of classic games, so it's highly unlikely that *Rampage*'s lightweight story has any dark hidden message in it.

What it does have, though, is an amazing awareness of pop culture and the ability to graft modern game mechanics to tried-and-tested 8-bit templates. Elements like cover-based shooting adapt perfectly to more traditional gameplay and make us wonder why no one ever thought of using them back in the day. *Rampage* is also an insane amount of fun, with bite-sized missions, lovely little touches like the distance of new objectives being judged in pixels, and a smattering of mini-games in Nolan's Arcade, which feature characters from other hit indie games.

And yet, while *Retro City Rampage* starts off incredibly strong, a number of things do stop this from being the terrific tribute it first appears to be. By far the most annoying aspect is the insane difficulty spikes that routinely crop up, which can make progress frustrating. The over-reliance on the same 'go from A to B' mission structure also begins to grate, particularly when Player himself gleefully points them out for being boring and unnecessary in other games. Then there's the baffling map, which doesn't point out key places like shops and ammo dumps, making them a real chore to find.

Even though *Retro City Rampage* does make several missteps, it manages to get so many things right. The end result is a fitting tribute to the halcyon days of gaming and an entertaining game in its own right.

FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

SPOT THE JOKE: There are so many obscure references in *Retro City Rampage* that we're sure we're missing many of them. A commentary pointing them out wouldn't have gone amiss.

VERDICT 8/10
A LOVING HOMAGE TO THE DAYS OF OLD

AFTER EIGHT YEARS OF QUESTING, LOOTING AND GRINDING, ARE PANDAS ENOUGH TO KEEP WOW INTERESTING?

World Of Warcraft: Mists Of Pandaria

Once an April Fools' prank; now a fully fledged expansion. *Mists Of Pandaria* introduces players to a forth continent in the world of Azeroth, managing to breathe new life into Blizzard's behemoth. Where Blizzard has ruthlessly experimented with death and destruction in previous expansions, allowing Deathwing to scour the landscape, opening the Dark Portal as a gateway between worlds and encouraging the Lich King to desecrate life, this time it hopes to remind players of the thrill of adventure.

Mists Of Pandaria is more personal than any previous expansion and presents a fascinating change of pace from *Cataclysm*. After crash-landing on the shores of Pandaria, our Retribution Paladin is instantly seen as an outsider, intent on causing chaos. The Horde and Alliance have arrived at the same time, both aiming to seize control of Pandaria, forgoing temporary allegiances. As part of the Alliance, it is up to your character to change the Pandaren view of these warring factions and prove that pure intentions exist in these perceived savages.

Blizzard has introduced new ways to drive the narrative, including conversational cut-scenes and out-of-character experiences. *MOP* is continuously trying to engage the player and, refreshingly, move beyond the wall of text that's become an MMO staple.

That's not the only first. Now a race can represent the banner of either faction. After proving their worth on the Wandering Isle under Shang Xi, at the end of their training, a Pandaren is faced with a choice. Unfortunately, reaching this decision hardly feels as if it bears the significance it should. Players are faced with a one-click choice between Alliance or Horde, whereas Blizzard could have presented players with various scenarios defined by multiple options, leaning toward either faction's tendencies. Instead, we get a knee-jerk decision that seemingly appears from thin air.

Still, the introduction of the extremely dynamic Monk class more than makes up for it. While not exclusive to our black-eyed buddies, the mysticism of the class perhaps resonates with their culture most of all. The Monk builds up chi, and breaks down its energy into combinations to take down enemies. Compared to other classes, Monks have superior skill with their hands and feet. They can execute spinning crane kicks, furious palm strikes and even roll out of combat. Despite their incredible DPS, Monks also make excellent healers and adept tanks. It is a natural solo class but will undoubtedly be a benefit to any group, whether it's at the beginning, middle or end of the game.

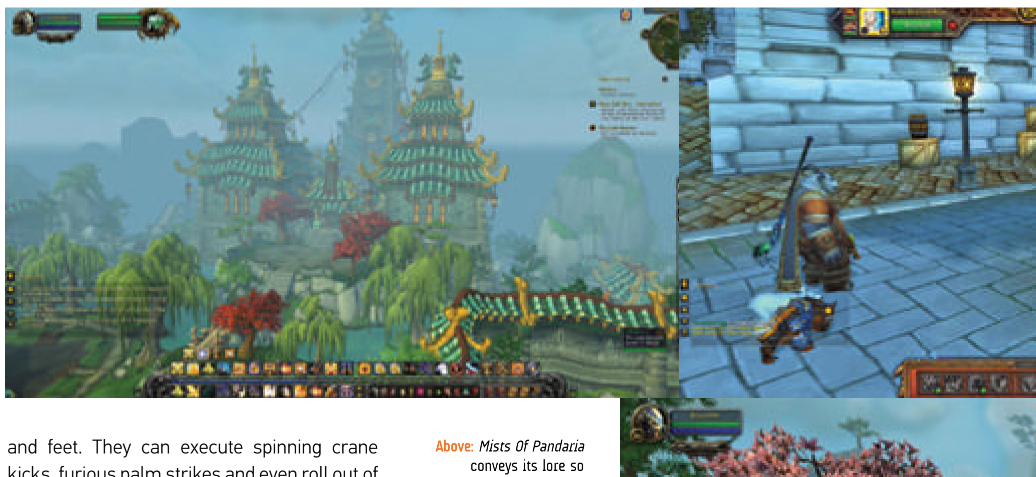
Once washed up on Pandaren shores, it becomes clear this is a very different world from the one we first experienced eight years ago. Dropping missiles on Horde strongholds from a gyrocopter, sniping Hozen in the head atop rocky mountains, even achieving full

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Mac
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Activision Blizzard
DEVELOPER: Blizzard
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: MMO
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows XP, Intel Pentium D, 2GB RAM, 256MB VRAM, 25GB HDD space
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



Right: The Pandaren are the first neutral race, each individual able to align with Alliance or Horde at the end of an early quest.



Above: *Mists Of Pandaria* conveys its lore so excellently it's hard not to get swept away.

Right: An obvious grab for the Chinese market? Possibly, but who cares when it's this beautiful?

BLIZZARD'S ZEST FOR ADVENTURE IS INFECTIOUS, AND IT FINALLY SEEMS TO HAVE PERFECTLY MERGED OUTRAGEOUS SCI-FI WITH LUXURIOUS LANDSCAPES

FURTHER READING: FIVE THINGS MISTS OF PANDARIA DOES RIGHT | FEATURE | ISSUE 128 | PAGE 156



BETTER THAN

WRATH OF THE LICH KING





WORSE THAN

CATACLYSM

FAQs

Q. PANDAREN WORTH ROLLING?
Definitely. Double rested XP, stamina boosts from eating and a hell of a strike that dazes opponents. Also, they're pandas.

Q. ARE THE NEW BATTLEGROUNDS GOOD?
Yes. More than ever, they'll force players to work together.

Q. DECENT ENDGAME?
Sure. Challenge-run dungeons, epic raid instances, free-form raid-scale scenarios with more to come in future patches, plus new PvP and Pet Battles. Basically, there's lots to do.

OUT ON THE BATTLEFIELD

Silvershard Mine and Temple of Kotmogu are new ten-on-ten battlegrounds in *Mists Of Pandaria*. In the mines, carts spawn and factions must capture them, fighting rivals to retain control. The cart has to reach the end of the line to earn points. Meanwhile, in the temple, factions must collect one of four artefacts from towers of light. However, the artefact debuffs its carrier, reducing durability but increasing damage output. A team earns points the longer a carrier keeps hold of the artefact. Both are heart-pounding battlegrounds that encourage both competitive and co-operative play in abundance.



concentration while meditating in a ring of fire. This isn't the same *World Of Warcraft* that encouraged Murloc-hunting and dragon-slaying. Yet it is a brave and beautiful world.

The Jade Forest is one of the most elegantly designed areas Blizzard has ever put together, the Valley of the Four Winds reverberates with soul, and the Pandaren capital is truly a marvel of architecture. Pandaria is full of mythology, legend and enchantment. Despite the same character models and textures, *WOW* has never seemed more glorious.

Sadly, not all changes will please players. In particular, the talent system revamp could tear the community in two. Instead of spending a skill point in a talent tree after gaining a level, you choose one tree then spend a point on one major attribute after several levelling milestones. Though a bold move, it makes some sense; Blizzard claimed the old system was 'unfixable' and would never balance. Unquestionably, though, this simplifies *WOW*, permanently expelling some of its magic. However, it does represent a more level playing field for newcomers, yet still takes a step closer to Blizzard's desired balance.

CONNECTED

EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY

POKE-HIM-ON: Pet Battles merge customisation, combat and cute in terrific turn-based tussles with more depth than might initially be apparent. It's nice to finally have something to do with pets.

MOP does offer some enticing treats for the core, however. Classic dungeons have been redeveloped to merge with storyline changes. Ragefire Chasm, while still doused in lava, is a completely different beast, and as a treat for the high levels, Scarlet Monastery and Scholomance have been totally rebuilt. Dungeon challenge modes also add new flavour to familiar territory. Regardless of level, parties enter instances with scaled gear, the goal being to complete it as quickly as possible. In addition to other content, trying to beat a dungeon's best time will keep players going for weeks.

However, it's the Pet Battles that will have you coming back for more. In all major capital cities, trainers can teach your characters how to tame, capture and even fight ferocious and fearless creatures. Pet Battles are addictive and fun, even if they are showcased in their simplest form. Further updates are sure to give pet-lovers more in the coming months.

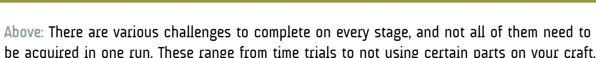
Mists Of Pandaria is a better addition to *World Of Warcraft* than many could have ever expected. Blizzard's zest for adventure is infectious, and it finally seems to have perfectly merged outrageous science fiction with luxurious landscapes. This expansion mostly manages to capture the imagination of new players while still rewarding the faithful. Despite the new bells and whistles, however, *World Of Warcraft* is still the same beast underneath. It just happens to be looking good for its age.

VERDICT 8/10
AN AMBITIOUS BUT POTENTIALLY ALIENATING UPDATE

ANOTHER REASON TO BE ANGRY?

Bad Piggies





Above: There are various challenges to complete on every stage, and not all of them need to be acquired in one run. These range from time trials to not using certain parts on your craft.

Love it or loathe it, *Angry Birds'* simplicity is its source of success. There's a bird, a slingshot, a target, and that's about it. Easy to pick up, easy to play. Surprisingly, then, for a follow-up to a series that's got more popular appeal than moaning and *The X Factor* combined, *Bad Piggies* abandons this immediacy for something more complex. As a result, it's far more satisfying. Detractors that used *Angry Birds*' simplicity as a stick to beat it will no doubt find *Bad Piggies* far more to their tastes. If Rovio's most famous series is about missiles, its new one is more focused on transport-based rocketry: same basic concepts, but getting your piggie home safely is a far more complex challenge than firing and forgetting a bird.

Unlike *Angry Birds*, where destruction is the order of the day, *Piggies* sees you building a series of ever more elaborate contraptions to transport your titular charge safely to a goal. Armed with a satisfying physics engine, diverse terrain and a toybox of modular gadgets, ranging from lowly wooden boxes and wheels to full-on motors and aviation tools, you'll be throwing together creations that look like the product of a collaboration between Dick Dastardly and MacGyver in no time at all.

As well as being tasked with getting your pig safely all the way home, there are other goals to strive for. One of the most frequent is the series of stars that the game asks you to collect on your way, and there are time challenges and other tasks to be thinking about.

Bad Piggies' appeal is that while simple in concept, it challenges your imagination as well as your engineering skill. There's a real thrill in working out how everything fits together, as well as iterating on your creation until it works – or crashes in hilarious failure, whichever comes first. With each unsuccessful attempt, however, you learn how to make it better, more efficient, and how to add a personal touch.

These skills really come to the fore in the Sandbox mode. Armed with a whole heap of parts, the game asks you to exercise your imagination to collect 20 different stars strewn over huge stages. Having more parts sounds good, but it comes at the cost of more complexity, giving players plenty to think about.

And you will be doing a lot of thinking, because even when you're not playing *Bad Piggies*, you'll be daydreaming about building new and improved craft that can overcome the game's many obstacles. Not a bad deal for 69p.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

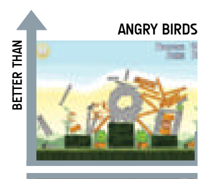
MAKE YOUR OWN: Okay, so 'unique' is probably pushing it. But there's no denying the appeal in creating your own flying machines, and watching them soar, crash or both. Utterly entertaining.

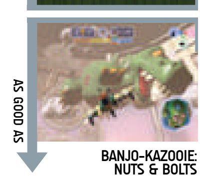
DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
OTHER FORMATS: Android, Mac, PC
ORIGIN: Finland
PUBLISHER: Rovio
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: 69p
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: iOS 4.0
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

ANGRY BIRDS





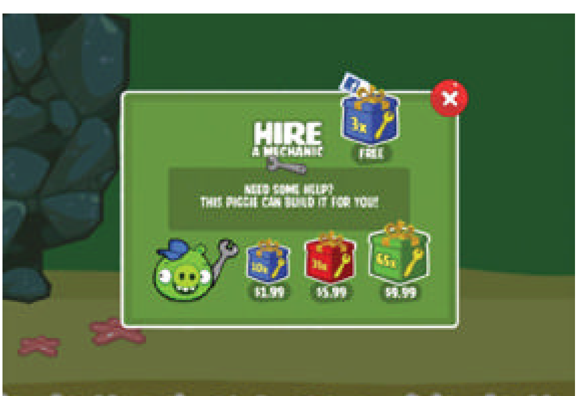
AS GOOD AS

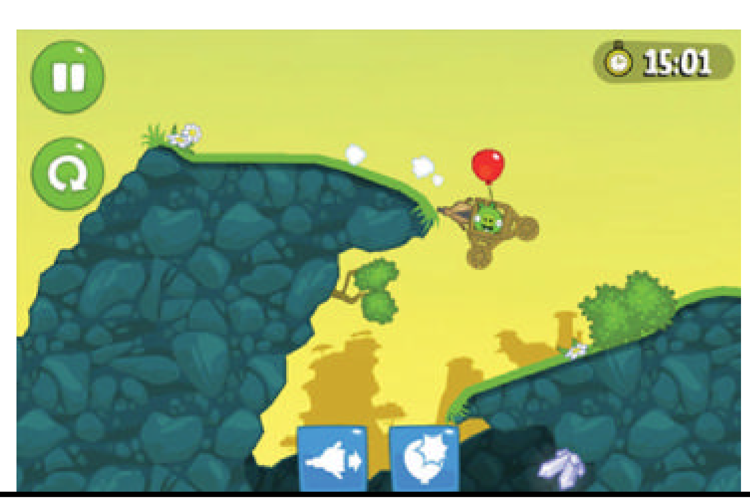
BANJO-KAZOOIE: NUTS & BOLTS



LESS ANGER, MORE FUN

Below: If you're particularly stuck on a certain stage or goal, help is at hand. By 'liking' *Bad Piggies* on various social networking sites or indulging in microtransactions, players can get a mechanic to build the ideal machine.



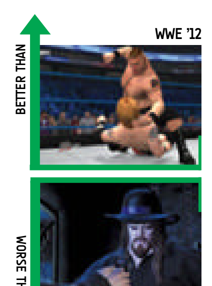


A GRAPPLER WITH ATTITUDE

WWE '13

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PS3, Wii
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: THQ
DEVELOPER: Yuke's
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



Even the most fanatical of wrestling fans would struggle to argue that the leading sports entertainment brand is in a good place right now. Compared to the feuds, bouts and storylines of yesteryear, current WWE events just can't seem to capture the imagination as they once did. It's an entertainment form about characters and scenarios as much as athleticism – *EastEnders* with suplexes – but the roster simply isn't there these days. It's why the WWE is seeing an influx of high-profile comebacks of late, and it's also why Yuke's has chosen to go back to one of the most memorable eras rather than tell a modern story for *WWE '13*'s main event.

Attitude mode takes players back to the Nineties to re-create the events that would finally see the WWF overtake WCW as the leading name in underdressed man ballet. Cut with footage and commentary from the time, this epic mode sings fondly of a golden age in wrestling history, recalling the most famous matches and arcs of the Attitude Era. Legal and rights issues with characters and even the company's own name remove a little of the sheen – it's slightly odd seeing virtual depictions of famous events with self-censoring Superstars. And in any case, the gameplay here is far more in line with what a wrestling game can and should be. It's not simply piledriver-pin-win on loop – historical objectives give you a brief script to follow, which helps dictate the flow of each match and facilitates more elaborate and flashy moments than a pure in-engine match could deliver. It serves to make every encounter more like the televised spectacle.

What doesn't help this, however, is the fact that the underlying engine is nowhere near fit for purpose. Counter windows seem annoyingly erratic in size, though this doesn't stop the CPU from reversing everything it chooses to; bodies constantly clip through ropes, ring and even one another, jarring horribly with the broadcast-style presentation; animations transition with all the fluidity of a jelly river, strikes failing to connect and grapples catching out of nowhere, whatever any of the characters happen to be doing. It's a mess at its worst, and while the possibilities and depth are certainly impressive, the way it all plays out, at least in the moment-to-moment stuff, is anything but.

Yuke's's genre-leading customisation options and the awesome Attitude mode will make this heaven for wrestling fans, but the clumsy engine mars what could otherwise have been the grappler that demanded even the most jaded fan sit up and smell what The Rock was cooking.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

TANK ENGINE: As much as THQ might wax lyrical about *WWE '13*'s new engine, it still feels like it hasn't changed since the PSone games. If only the mechanics were there to back up the great content.



Above: Today's wrestlers are in there to bring in the current fans, but harking back to what is considered a golden age for professional wrestling seems like an astute way to attract a few lapsed WWE followers.





Above: The story follows the events of the Attitude Era. Right: Classic match-ups offer historical objectives, tasking you with re-creating key events from the real match, such as putting the opponent through the announcers' table.

VERDICT 6/10
AN ENGINE OVERHAUL AWAY FROM GREATNESS

LET'S GO ROUND AGAIN

Dance Central 3

We pity Kinect owners. In the two years since Microsoft unleashed its all-seeing motion control marvel, there's been nary a whiff of a solid software title that lived up to the technological promise of the device. It therefore falls once again to Harmonix to prove that *Dance Central*, despite its breeziness, is the only worthwhile reason to own a Kinect.

Unfortunately, now on its third entry, it's clear that the appeal of *Dance Central* is beginning to wane slightly. That's not to say that the main act of jumping in front of your television and wiggling, flailing and generally looking like a prat isn't an unadulterated blast, but aside from a fresh crop of licensed tracks, new improvements to the format feel relatively ineffective.

The biggest addition is the story mode, where players dance through various eras as part of an undercover group of dancing crime fighters. Among the campy nonsense of the game's plot, there are some enjoyable mini-games – you have to hunt for the dance craze of each respective era – but you're ostensibly running through the entire eclectic soundtrack, which most certainly won't be to everyone's tastes.

It's also worth noting that the entry level has been broadened with new difficulty setting Beginner. A much more forgiving option than Easy, it also makes the jump to Intermediate feel like too much of a steep curve than last time around. But ultimately it depends on what you want to get out of *Dance Central 3*: a fun party game or a tool for ritual humiliation. If it's the latter then you'll be pleased to know that multiplayer has seen some significant improvements.

While, this being a Kinect game, anyone lacking a living room the size of Wembley Stadium will struggle to find space, Crew Throwdowns enable two teams of four to battle it out in an epic dance-off. The structure is nothing short of chaotic, but it's also incredibly enjoyable, interspersing challenges – such as Horse, where players have to re-create each other's moves – with the usual battle for dance floor supremacy.

However, those who prefer to hone their slick dance moves solo will be delighted to discover that Rehearsal mode has been tailored more towards acting as a pro tool, with the ability to play back live-action footage of your dancing. But while this surplus of minor design tweaks improves the experience, it doesn't drastically innovate to the same degree as *Dance Central 2*. It all feels very much business as usual, with the appeal to the masses reliant on the fresh crop of new songs. It looks like the dance floor is beginning to lose its shine.

Below: There's a larger selection of songs from the Seventies, Eighties and Nineties in *Dance Central 3*, with everything from Gloria Gaynor's *I Will Survive* to the Backstreet Boys' *Backstreet's Back*.



DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Microsoft
DEVELOPER: Harmonix
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-8
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN — JUST DANCE 4



AS GOOD AS — DANCE CENTRAL 2

ENHANCED

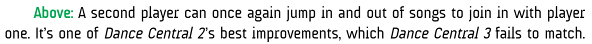
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

DANCE-OFF: While the last game drastically improved the two-player aspect, this time around Crew Throwdowns enable eight players to jump in and out of one-on-one battles.

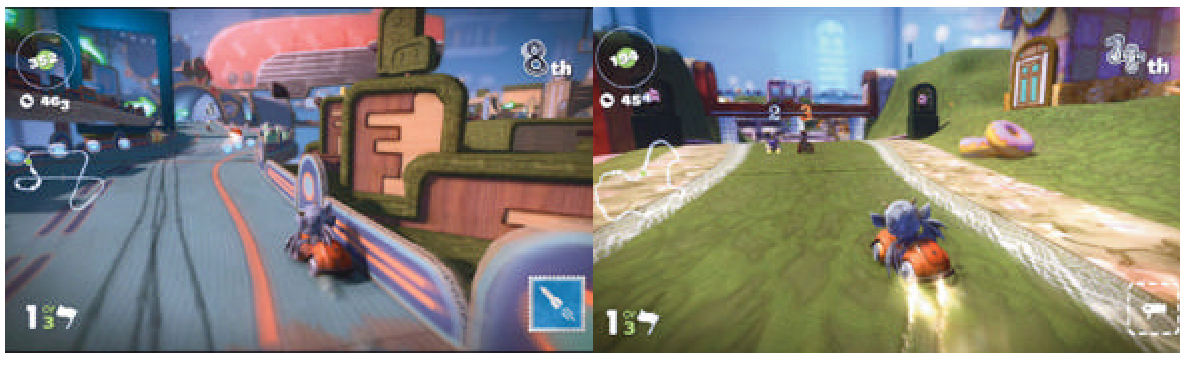
VERDICT 7/10

RELIABLY SLICK, BUT THE CHARM IS FADING




Above: A second player can once again jump in and out of songs to join in with player one. It's one of *Dance Central 2*'s best improvements, which *Dance Central 3* fails to match.





Left: There's a great variety of tracks to get stuck into, the *WipEout* homage levels being a particular treat, but it's clear that the focus in *LittleBigPlanet Karting* is on the player creation and ideas that will materialise as soon as the game is out in the wild.

IT'S-A ME, SACKBOY

LittleBigPlanet Karting

Though it might seem a little odd to think that *LittleBigPlanet Karting*'s main rival, *ModNation Racers*, was developed under the exact same roof as Sackboy's spin-off, it's promising to see Media Molecule's enduring spirit shine through. *LittleBigPlanet*'s mantra of 'Play, Create, Share' was always going to sit well with the karting genre – so much so that *ModNation Racers* got there first – but as with Media Molecule's other games, it's the sheer volume of choice and tools at the player's disposal that keeps things interesting.

Of course, that wouldn't mean anything if the actual racing wasn't up to much. Though Sackboy and friends' on-track antics do fall short of the perfect weapon/kart balancing of Mario's series – ignoring the blue shells, of course – United Front has made significant improvements over *ModNation*'s racing. Played offline, *LittleBigPlanet*'s AI can feel like it's out to get you, but take your competition online and Sackboy's mix of weapons and vibrant courses makes for some gloriously messy races. There's a roughness to the environments that we've come to expect with *LittleBigPlanet* – edges that snag or sections of track that leave you lost – but the simplicity of the genre actually makes building and racing easier to understand and implement than the platforming the series is famous for.

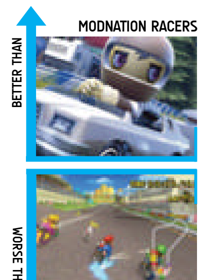
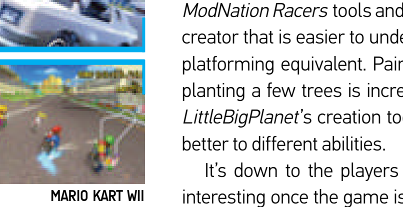
There are plenty of tracks to offer inspiration throughout *LittleBigPlanet Karting*'s story mode, but it's less of a distraction than it could have been. As with every *LittleBigPlanet*, it comes down to the creation toolset and what can be achieved with it. Here United Front and Media Molecule evolve the *ModNation Racers* tools and provide a track creator that is easier to understand than its platforming equivalent. Painting roads and planting a few trees is incredibly easy, and *LittleBigPlanet*'s creation tools scale much better to different abilities.

It's down to the players to keep things interesting once the game is in their hands, though. It could be argued that although *LittleBigPlanet Karting* manages to cram in enough trackside clutter to keep players distracted when building, the track layout itself remains rigid out of creative necessity. Even United Front's own designs feel dense with trackside detail, even if the road layout itself carves a basic route. As always with *LittleBigPlanet*, it's down to individual players to prove what the true limitations of the tools are.

These are minor issues in the context of *LittleBigPlanet Karting*'s overall design, though. Media Molecule's sense of pure creation sits perfectly with the karting genre and we'd even go as far as to say that players will find it easier to be both player and creator here than they would in the previous games. Just don't expect to find Mario looking over his shoulder any time soon.

DETAILS

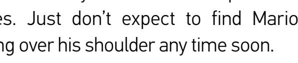
FORMAT: PS3
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Sony Computer Entertainment
DEVELOPER: United Front Games
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-8
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

CONNECTED

EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY

SHARE THE LOVE: There's greater scope for players to enjoy the tracks made by others in *LittleBigPlanet Karting*. With more than four players racing at once, good tracks will stand out from the crowd.




VERDICT 8/10
LITTLEBIGPLANET WILL KEEP ON GIVING



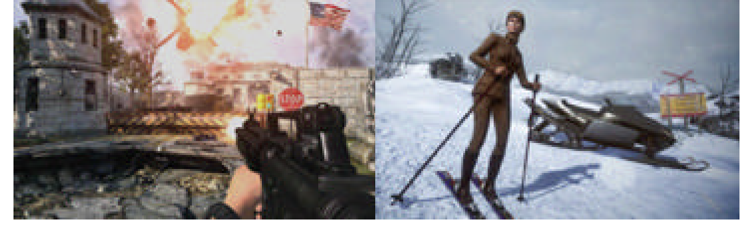
Above: Unfortunately, weapons feel like something of an afterthought and can really get in the way of an enjoyable race.



Some of the likenesses are pretty accurate, so thankfully there's nothing as heinous as what happened to poor old Robbie Coltrane in the *GoldenEye* remake.

THE SPY WHO BORED ME

007 Legends



***007 Legends* was never going to trouble any of this season's big hitters, but it could have been a competent little tie-in for *Skyfall*.** The developer, Eurocom, isn't without talent, after all, having dallied with Bond before in the passable *Quantum Of Solace* and the *GoldenEye* remake, among others.

007 Legends, however, is not passable. It's a shambles, a hastily knocked out, unpolished facsimile of *Call Of Duty* with the odd gadget-fidgeting for 'diversity'. Even the font used in the multiplayer is the same as the *Modern Warfare* series. *007 Legends* has borrowed all the worst traits of the worst military shooters, often throwing you into full-on battle, urging you to tediously inch forward while shooting at chaps who will conveniently pop their heads above cover from time to time. Sound familiar?

The idea of the game is that Bond, again modelled after skulking hunk Daniel Craig, is going through a near-death experience, having flashbacks about all his other missions, thus giving you, the player, the chance to relive all those classic movies – and *Die Another Day* – as if re-imagined by a 15-year-old gun-crazy idiot boy.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PC, PS3, Wii U
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Activision
DEVELOPER: Eurocom
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-12
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN
TURNING POINT: FALL OF LIBERTY



WORSE THAN
GOLDENEYE 007: RELOADED

Every modern videogame annoyance is present. Linear, uninspired level design; NPCs that get in your way and stop you from getting into cover; QTE boss battles. There's some pretty shocking AI too, causing enemies to run into walls often, and one henchman ran blithely into a raging fire. It's so utterly without its own identity too.

What's most frustrating, though, is that there's occasionally a decent game wriggling to get out. The shooting is fun in small doses, and the gadget nonsense is engaging in a similar way to the crime scene investigation parts from *Condemned*. There's a levelling system, too, if that intrigues, unlocking new abilities like quicker aiming and reloading, or better chat-up lines. Okay, that last one's a lie. The multiplayer's okay in a 'like *Call Of Duty* but not as good' sort of way too. Any positivity to be garnered is quickly dispelled by the painfully average stopping and popping down the iron sights, though, as well as some dreadful vehicle sections.

The real heartbreaker is that great things could be done with the *Bond* licence that wouldn't necessarily need to subscribe to the archetypal dumb FPS format. Imagine a *Bond* game like the criminally underrated *Alpha Protocol*, for instance, Bond talking his way out of a firefight rather than interminably crouching and moving forward during one. Sadly, that won't happen any time soon.

Even if you're mad about Bond, stick to the *GoldenEye* remake. In fact, just play *GoldenEye 007*, because it's still the best. *007 Legends* will leave you shaken, stirred and wishing you bought a better game.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

LICENCE TO SNEAK: Given the chance, more spy shenanigans would be welcome and less humdrum first-person tedium. There's not much espionage in the life of a spy, if this game is to be believed.

VERDICT 4/10
LEAVE AND LET IT DIE

Below: There's no denying the game looks unmistakably *Silent Hill*-ish, and the cast of psychological nightmare characters make their return, even if they aren't used well. The nurses, for example, are boiled down to orgasmic noise-making cannon fodder.





Above: For some reason the campaign isn't drop-in/drop-out with its co-op. This seems bizarre considering it would be a perfect game for this system. Though not much makes sense with *Book Of Memories*.

ON THE PLUS SIDE, AT LEAST IT'S NOT A BULLET HELL SHMUP

Silent Hill: Book Of Memories

***Silent Hill: Downpour* wasn't a misstep for the series; it just wasn't handled as well as it could have been.** The new *Silent Hill: Book Of Memories*, on the other hand, is a poorly handled misstep. It is a game that makes no sense in the context of the franchise and, aside from that, it just isn't very much fun to play.

A top-down dungeon-crawler isn't the likeliest of suggestions when brainstorming the next chapter in a long-running survival horror series, but that's what we're met with in *Book Of Memories*. Playing through a couple of dozen zones in the main campaign, the formula remains disconcertingly similar throughout: find puzzle pieces, find the exit, solve a puzzle, move on to the next level.

In each zone you can access other, special rooms – shops, areas providing more back story and so on – but it's not the sort of experience where you'll find yourself trying your best to try to open each room and explore every nook and cranny, even if it doesn't take that long to finish any given level.

This is because it's just not much fun. Combat is base-level nonsense and there's a lot of it, with players able to wield a variety of weapons, one-handed, two-handed, dual-wielding and projectile variations all popping up. But all it boils down to is using the half-functioning lock-on system, which will lock to a new enemy when the last target is killed, but not actually bring up any of their information on screen, requiring a second press of the button while hammering square and triangle until everything around you is dead. Some enemies, like the butcher, might need a bit of blocking thrown in for good measure, but the ability to dodge and counter is rendered almost pointless by the fact that you can spam your way through 90 per cent of encounters.

But hey, at least there are puzzles, right? Puzzles that are nearly identical on every zone, rendering them boring, not fun and utterly pointless. Place statues, vases or other in order. That's it.

It's not the worst game ever, of course. With more people playing, it's sure to be a bit of fun, however long that lasts, and those who stick with it will see a massive supply of randomly generated levels once the main story is completed, potentially keeping you going for a long time.

But it's not a horror experience. There are attempts to slap on some kind of *Silent Hill*-esque story to everything, but it's utterly worthless. *Silent Hill: Book Of Memories* is a shallow dungeon-crawler, with even the likes of *Dungeon Hunter: Alliance* providing more fun. It is, in short, a failure; not the sort of thing we want from *Silent Hill*, nor the sort of thing we want for the Vita.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS Vita
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Konami
DEVELOPER: WayForward Technologies
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN

GODS EATER BURST



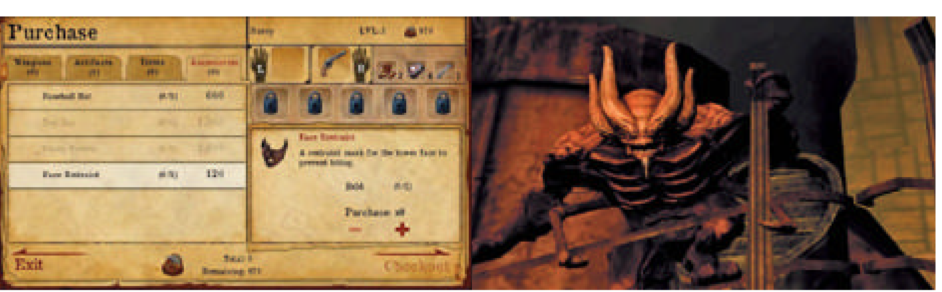
WORSE THAN

DUNGEON HUNTER: ALLIANCE

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

OR NOT: *Downpour* wasn't the best *Silent Hill* game out there, but it did a lot right, particularly as recent instalments go. The same cannot be said for *Book Of Memories*, which is misjudged in the extreme.





YOU'LL WANT TO KEEP SILENT ABOUT THIS MEMORY



TURTLE BEACH
CALL OF DUTY
BLACK OPS II
THE FUTURE IS BLACK™
EAR FORCE®
TANGO
DOLBY DIGITAL 5.1 SURROUND SOUND
FULLY PROGRAMMABLE WITH CUSTOMIZABLE PRESETS
COMPLETELY WIRELESS GAME AUDIO & CHAT
SEE THE ENTIRE SQUADRON OF CALL OF DUTY® BLACK OPS II
HEADSETS AT TURTLEBEACH.COM/UK
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POLITICS JUST GOT A LOT MORE FUN

Liberation Maiden

Below: Gallery mode adds some longevity with what are basically a list of achievements. Some unlock text files with back story, while others grant access to secret anime videos.



Once a part of the Japan-only *Guild01* – a compilation of four small 3DS games, each created by a well-known game developer or personality – *Liberation Maiden* has now broken out on its own and is one of the three *Guild01* titles released digitally on Nintendo's eShop. Out of the context of a packaged compilation, it takes on a whole new set of criteria with regard to value or quality.

In some ways, it seems amazing for a download release. Boasting some extremely impressive visuals, the free-roaming 3D shoot-'em-up appears to have much higher production values than you would ever expect from this sort of release and, initially at least, plays like a full-price, full-bodied game.

Putting you in control of a teenage girl who also happens to be the president of future Japan and the country's best mecha pilot should be your first clue that you're playing a Suda51 production. But this is a Suda51 game as developed by Level-5 and not Grasshopper, and is fairly reserved in its game mechanics as a result. Piloting the mech with the analogue stick and aiming with the touch screen and stylus, it offers the same independence of movement and attack as you'd expect from something like Treasure's *Sin And Punishment*, only it's not on-rails and is top-down. The controls are therefore less about weaving between walls of bullets and more about gracefully navigating a 3D space. There's a lock-on button that allows you to circle strafe any enemy, but it's sometimes more fun to dance around a battle, turning on the spot to take on different foes at once with lock-on missiles, or boosting over the top of something as you rain laser fire down.

On a purely mechanical level, *Liberation Maiden* is a pleasure to play, and its score attack nature forces you to master the controls over a number of replays. But for those who like to play through a game from beginning to end, there's a distinct lack of variety. The missions are basically structured in the same way – kill enemies to locate a hidden power spike, strafe around and destroy that spike once you've found it, and then move on to the boss – and there's nothing resembling the wide variety of scenarios, gameplay styles and set pieces that defined, say, *Star Fox 64*, which came out 15 years ago.

What hurts most about *Liberation Maiden*, however, is that just when it feels like it's getting interesting, with a stage that's basically one epic, shifting boss battle, it unexpectedly screeches to a halt, reminding you that you've bought what was originally one quarter of a bigger game. At £7.19, it's arguably a quarter of the cost, of course, but there are much lengthier and better games on the eShop. Like *Pullblox*, for example, and that game is cheaper too.

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Level-5/Grasshopper Manufacture
DEVELOPER: Level-5
PRICE: £7.19
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: 3D SPACE TANK

WORSE THAN: SIN AND PUNISHMENT: SUCCESSOR OF THE SKIES

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

RETROGRADE: The 3D presentation of *Liberation Maiden*, coupled with its cool shooting and old-school values, make it feel like a great, lost N64 game. Maybe even an unfinished one, given how short it is.

VERDICT 6/10

FEELS SHORT-LIVED OUTSIDE ITS ORIGINAL CONTEXT



Above: One of the most notable Suda influences is that Japanese citizens will tweet you, mid-battle, with words of encouragement.



VICE TO MEET YOU

Hotline Miami



Dennaton's creeping, psychedelic, coke-fuelled slasher, *Hotline Miami*, has probably received more column inches than any indie game to date. The pervasive combination of *Grand Theft Auto* new and old probably has something to do with it; *Hotline Miami* looks like a patchwork hybrid of classic *GTA* and *Vice City*. Dig a little deeper, though, and you'll find a game that's as sinister as it is confusing, and as frantic as it is meticulous.

You play as an unnamed and unknown killer, tasked with entering various houses, discos and strongholds in order to brutally off anyone lurking inside. Your employers are animal-headed weirdos who may or may not be real, and the whole thing is fogged in a drug-addled haze that seeps into you as you play.

Mechanically, *Hotline Miami* is an unusual cross between a top-down brawler and *Super Meat Boy*. You'll die constantly, as you can only take one hit from a knife, bat or gun, but the instant restarts mean you'll invariably try again. And again. Slicing through the inhabitants of each house requires both meticulous planning and twitch-heavy violence, as you quickly eliminate a guard, grab his weapon, and take on his cohorts in as efficient a way as possible. Every death is an opportunity to learn, a chance to mentally map the best way through the level in order to execute your executions.

When *Hotline Miami* flows, it's glorious. Chaining moves and kills together is oddly reminiscent of *Halo*, as you overcome ridiculous odds by controlling your own panic levels and using the tools at your disposal to eliminate threats. At times, though, gaps in AI and collision detection rather than your own inadequacy can prove your undoing, and that's almost enough to make you don an owl mask and start terrorising your living room.

Ah yes, the masks. They act as perks, and your chosen mask will give you the power to kill instantly with doors, for example, or fish out secret weapons. They're more than that, though. They're odd – both comical and disturbing – and are completely integral to maintaining *Hotline Miami*'s terrifically unsettling ambience.

So too is the world-class soundtrack: an eclectic mix of dark synth and pounding Eighties techno that is as fundamental to the experience as the mechanics. The obvious touchstone is the movie *Drive*, but *Hotline Miami*'s soundtrack is darker, nastier and even more effective.

Unfortunately, our review experience was severely hampered by bugs. Progress glitches, crashes and freezes repeatedly dogged the flow of the game, and it took multiple reinstalls just to get past the fourth level.

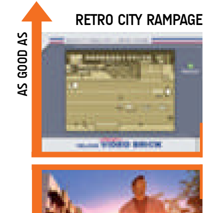
A shame, too, as when it works – and, for many, it appears to do so just fine – *Hotline Miami* is a brooding, twisted fantasy that is as strong mechanically as it is stylistically. Another indie treat for 2012.

DETAILS

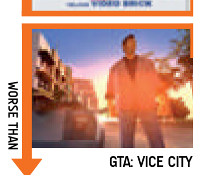
FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: Sweden
PUBLISHER: Devolver Digital
DEVELOPER: Dennaton Games
PRICE: £6.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows XP, 1.2GHz processor, 512MB RAM, DirectX 8-compatible graphics card with 32MB VRAM, 250MB HDD space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

AS GOOD AS

RETRO CITY RAMPAGE



WORSE THAN



GTA: VICE CITY



Above: The flow of death and restart is becoming a familiar trope in indie gaming. It works as well here as it does in *Trials* and *Super Meat Boy*, and the frustration is always balanced with the immediacy of the action.

FINGERPRINT

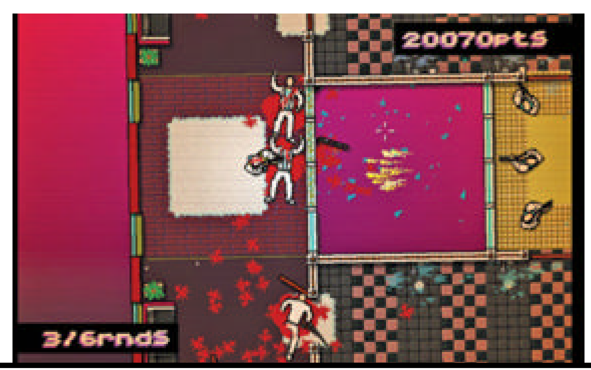
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

GUT CHECK: *Hotline Miami*'s violence is shocking at times, but it works perfectly with the gaudy aesthetic. It could even be read as a comment on violence in games.

VERDICT 8/10

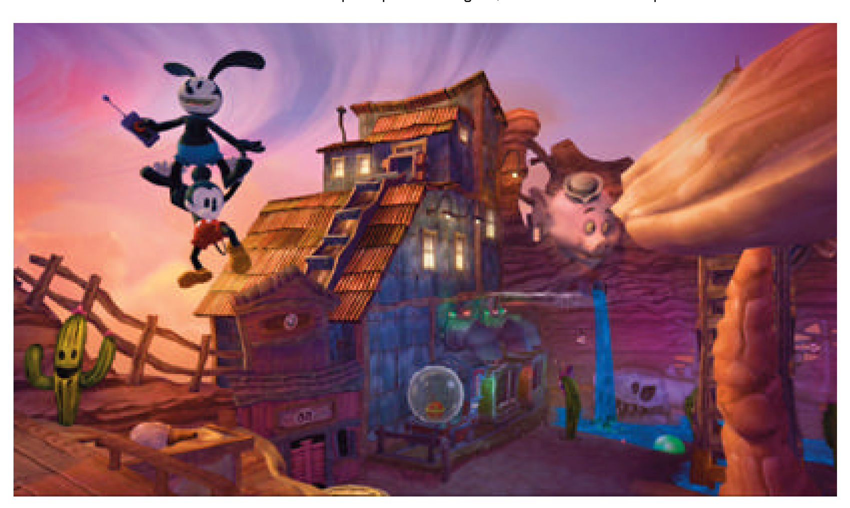
INTELLIGENT, BRUTAL AND MOREISH ULTRAVIOLENCE

Below: The controls are unusual at first, but vital. You move with WASD and aim with the mouse, making the game feel like a super-fast twin-stick shooter. The level of precision and speed is fundamental.





Below: There are plenty of Disney references throughout the world, but we'd rather the characters were active participants in the game, rather than the made-up non-entities that are used.





A REAL MICKEY MOUSE OPERATION

Epic Mickey 2: The Power Of Two

If we were to say that *Epic Mickey 2* reminds us of our childhoods then you'd probably assume that was a positive; that this licensed, children's platform game also has the ability to transport grown adults to a time when every experience was new and enchanting. Well that would be nice, wouldn't it?

But no, *Epic Mickey 2* takes us back to a part of our gaming past best left there. Weirdly, it reminds us of the adventure-platform games of the C64 and Spectrum era – those games where you would wander around aimlessly, not knowing where to go or what to do, each success happening by pure luck rather than any conscious accomplishment. The sort of game design so bad that it made you feel like you just didn't understand the game. *Epic Mickey 2* excels in bad design. It features a quest list as long as your arm, with no indication of why you should bother to complete it, or why you should care. Its signposting is either nonexistent when it's needed, or over-used when it's not. And its world is so badly pieced together that you rarely know where you are in relation to where you're going, if you even have any idea of where exactly you're meant to be going or why.

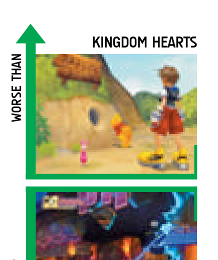
This is a problem the original *Epic Mickey* suffered from too; a mid-Nineties PC game style of design that refused to learn anything from the user-friendliness of console gaming, making the horrible mistake of dumbing down complexity rather than broadening accessibility. And despite a few new additions, this is a sequel that retreads almost all of the first game's problems, from a central painting mechanic that feels under-used, scripted and even contradictory to its own ruleset, to a mixed tone that treads a tiresome line between extremely shallow RPG/adventure systems and platform gameplay that takes all its lessons from the shoddy Euro-platformers of the Amiga instead of the Japanese masters.

Yes, there are some new features here, but when none of the core mechanics of the original game have been fixed, you'd be a fool to expect the new ideas to be any good. Central to these is the co-operative play between Mickey and Oswald – a fine idea when you have two players working together, but in single-player it becomes an exercise in tedium as you wait for the dull AI to catch up with you and then have to watch it play half of the game. Swapping between the two characters might have been impractical, but it would certainly have been more fun.

Neither the smart adventure we know creator Warren Spector is capable of, nor an accomplished enough platformer to compete with *Mario*, *Rayman* or even *Ratchet & Clank*. The most disappointing thing about *Epic Mickey* is that it doesn't even improve on itself.

DETAILS

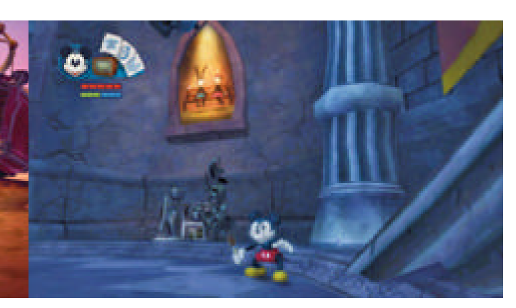
FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: Mac, PC, PS3, Wii, Wii U
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Disney
DEVELOPER: Junction Point Studios
PRICE: £32.99
RELEASE: 23 November
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: No



MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

SIDE-ON STORY: One of the most fun things about *Epic Mickey 2*, as with the first game, is the 2D platforming. It's a short-lived bonus, however, when it should be the main game, much like the 3DS spin-off.







Above: See the pink balloon hidden far in the distance? There are lots of those hidden in the game. Once collected, they're used as currency to unlock fun game modifiers referred to as 'toys'.

W COULDN' E OTHERED T RITE A INE HER

The Unfinished Swan*

If there's any part of *The Unfinished Swan* that should be familiar to everyone, it's the one part that developer Giant Sparrow has been showing off for years: a section of the first-person adventure that is completely drenched in blinding white, the player armed only with a paint gun that shoots out blobs of black paint to add definition to the world and mark out its dimensions. It's a tantalisingly original idea for a game, but as the developer has been warning for a while, it's only a small part of what makes up *The Unfinished Swan*.

In the role of a young boy named Maurice, you follow the titular swan through a mysterious world accessed via a magic door in your bedroom. Each new location is used to explain the back story of a king who once lived there and, as such, these locations go through significant changes as they evolve. At the start you're just painting the world to uncover your way around it, but you'll later find yourself spraying water on the surroundings to make climbable vines grow where you need them or throwing balls at lightbulbs to expand the amount of light, and therefore safe areas, within a room. By the end, you're doing something totally different, armed with a gun that pinpoints geometric points to build 3D platforms out of nothing.

What starts off as a *Limbo*-like story puzzler expands over time to be reminiscent of *Portal* in its original complexity. And what's perhaps most remarkable about this is that it does it all so naturally, introducing new forms of interaction, unencumbered by needless tutorials or cut-scenes. And though the art style definitely expands with each chapter, it holds true to an overall look throughout, clinging on to its personality while making sure that both visual and audio presentation are always in service of the game design in addition to being nice and whimsical.

Though ostensibly a first-person shooter, *The Unfinished Swan* is almost 100 per cent free of conflict. There's one short section in which Maurice can be hurt, but his arsenal of paint, water and abstract construction tools cannot harm anyone else, and this does a lot to make *The Unfinished Swan* feel refreshing. There's a heavy puzzle tone, falling between *Ico* and *Portal*, and there's an equal satisfaction to figuring it all out, but, moreover, *The Unfinished Swan* is a journey.

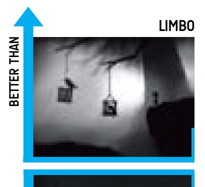
It's a game you can play to completion in a single day – leading some to dismiss it as poor value – but that really is to miss the point. Every minute of *The Unfinished Swan* is beautiful to behold, stunning in its elegant inventiveness and, thanks to the way it constantly changes right up to the end, it holds the attention like few other games. There's a reason you'll finish it in a day: because you won't be able to tear yourself away.

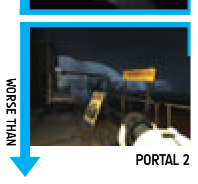
DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 3
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Sony
DEVELOPER: Giant Sparrow/ Sony Santa Monica
PRICE: £9.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

LIMBO





WORSE THAN

PORTAL 2

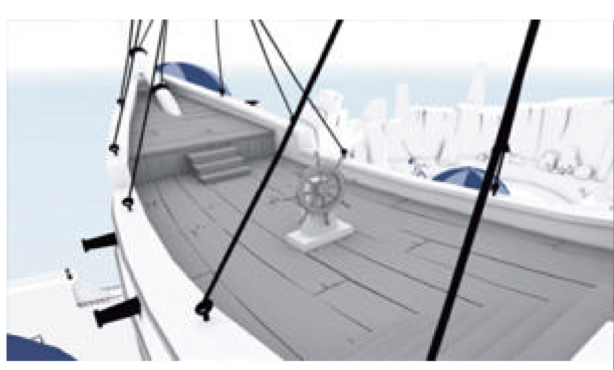
FINGERPRINT

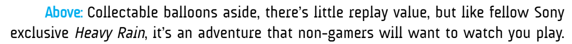
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

MOVING: One of the few great Move games, *Swan* uses Sony's motion controller in a way that's intuitive and natural. The DualShock 3 is supported, but if you own a Move it'll thank you for the use.

VERDICT 9/10

A RARE COMBINATION OF PRETTY AND CLEVER





Above: Collectable balloons aside, there's little replay value, but like fellow Sony exclusive *Heavy Rain*, it's an adventure that non-gamers will want to watch you play.





Milestone's games have suffered when compared to their competitors' visuals in the past, but *WRC 3* looks the part. The vehicles, at least, are sparkling with detail, while the tracks themselves chuck up plenty of neat particle effects.

APEX TWIN

WRC 3



***WRC 3*, the latest in Milestone's attempts to revitalise the gaming world's interest in windy dirt roads and sponsor-covered Japanese cars, is so difficult at first it almost feels like a grift.** After the friendly intro, the cartoon caricature driver select screen, and loading tips that encourage you to drive recklessly to harvest shiny stars, you're chucked onto a road where one tiny mistake will leave you firmly in last place. By a mile. It's like the *Dark Souls* of driving games.

WRC 3, for all its arcade trappings, is merciless. On all but the very easiest setting, you will come at the bottom of the rankings if you so much as fluff up a couple of corners. We're not talking smashing into the railings or dropping off a cliff here. We're talking slightly overcooking a hairpin or misjudging a couple of apexes. If you stick with the intermediate and default difficulty settings, you could be sat on the first two tracks of the signature Road To Glory mode for a very long time indeed.

It's a curious design choice, because the game itself is a cheery little drive. While extremely tricky in terms of progression, the handling model is easy to get to grips with and fairly forgiving, meaning you can concentrate on the knife-edge tension of circumnavigating one of the game's 70-plus courses.

And when it all does finally click and you start blasting through courses with near-flawless dexterity, there's an unusual and quite captivating sense of flow. It almost stops feeling like a normal driving game and more like a high-level shooter or rhythm-action game, such is the complete freedom of negative thought that you need to succeed.

It's nice, too, to play a rally game that doesn't want to be anything else. There's a purity to rally that you don't get in head-to-head racing; the magic of time trial distilled, with courses built to test your skill behind the wheel. Before long, you'll be feathering the gas, cranking the handbrake on hairpins and flying over jumps like a pro. Well, like someone who can cope with the ridiculous demands of the game, anyway.

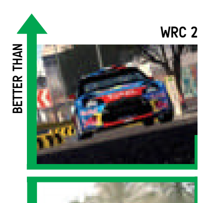
Beyond the Road To Glory mode, which is a fairly traditional racing game structure of unlocks and challenges, there's a more grounded WRC Experience, which sticks you in the highest-end cars on the trickiest rally tracks on earth. Good luck with that one. It might not be the most progressive racing game out there, but it serves its purpose well.

If you have the patience to learn or the humility to play on Easy, *WRC 3* is Milestone's best game yet, and a pleasing sideshow to the thrills of *DiRT*. Just be prepared to feel bad about yourself. You're not as good a driver as you think you are.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PC, PS3, PS Vita
ORIGIN: Italy
PUBLISHER: Milestone
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-16
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN



WRC 2

WORSE THAN



DIRT 3

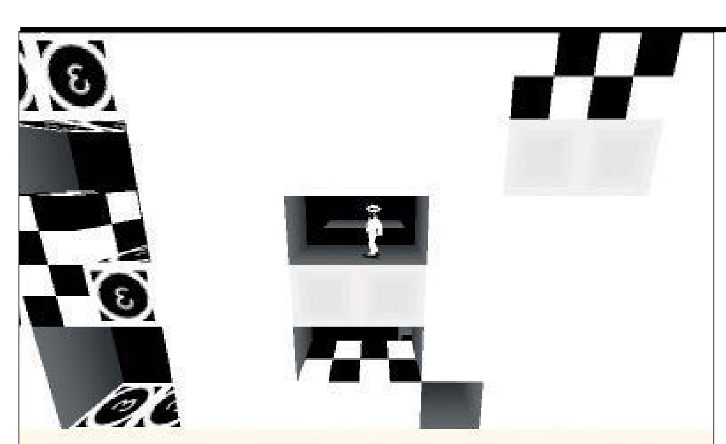
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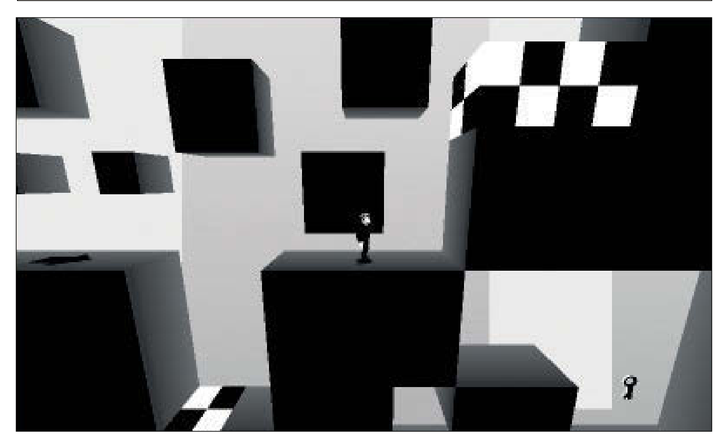
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

STAR PLAYER: The combination of hardcore rally physics and arcade presentation makes *WRC 3* an oddly accessible yet very difficult racer, aimed at fans but certainly capable of ensnaring others.

VERDICT 7/10

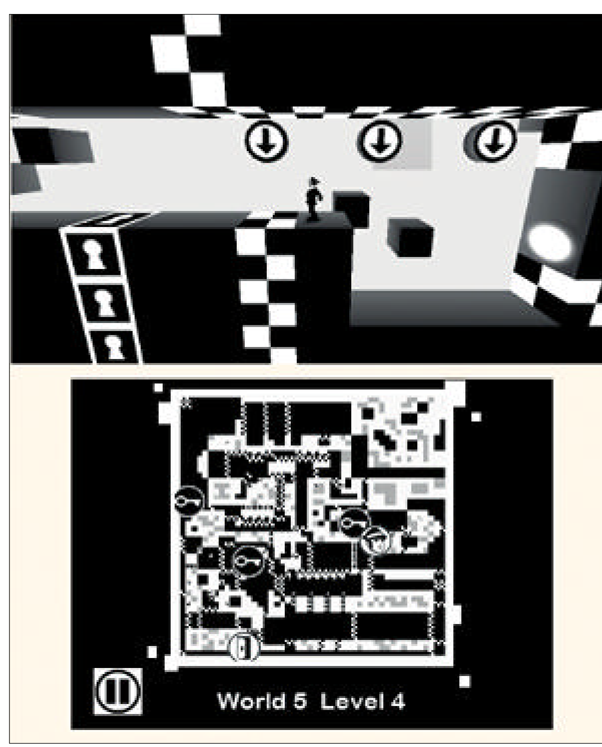
A TOUGH BUT ODDLY ACCESSIBLE DRIFT





Left: When you switch to the white polarity, it can often be hard work on your eyeballs.

Bottom: The map on the bottom screen quickly becomes clogged with icons that are too large, obscuring useful information.



IT DOESN'T MATTER IF YOU'RE BLACK OR WHITE

Shifting World

It goes to show just how influential mobile and web-based games are when you consider the volume of titles that are being ported from non-gaming platforms to traditional consoles. *Angry Birds* has just flown in on the 3DS, and former classics like *Flight Control* and *Fruit Ninja* have also made the jump. It's now the turn of *Shifting World*, an updated edition of a Flash title by the name of *Shift*, which has also enjoyed considerable success on iOS and Android.

A puzzle-platformer set in a world viewed only in black and white, *Shifting World*'s gimmick is the ability to flip the colour of the landscape in order to get to the end of the level. Find your route blocked by a wall? Switch polarity and the black wall becomes open space, while the white air you were previously standing in is repurposed as a solid walkway. It's an inventive premise, and one that has helped the original *Shift* gain millions of admirers.

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Belgium
PUBLISHER: Rising Star Games
DEVELOPER: Fishing Cactus
PRICE: £19.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1

BETTER THAN PUZZLER MIND GYM 3D



WORSE THAN CRUSH 3D

However, Fishing Cactus has clearly realised that simply carrying over the existing game wouldn't be enough to entice more demanding console users. *Shifting World* has therefore become *Shift* writ large; a hokey plot has been appended and the levels have been expanded considerably, moving away from the beautifully self-contained single-screen affairs of the original and instead embracing massive stages that take far longer to navigate.

This throws up some serious issues. For one, death in *Shifting World* comes regularly and often without warning, and sees you sent back to the very start of the stage. When you factor in the scope of some of the levels, this is incredibly frustrating. Also, later challenges are mind-bendingly difficult, and when you extrapolate them over a much larger play area, it takes a seriously adept mind to solve them without feeling a slight twinge of exasperation.

With the striking simplicity of *Shift* all but lost, it falls on the other elements of the package to entertain. Again, *Shifting World* is found wanting. Despite boasting three game modes, you're effectively getting the same levels but played differently; Time Attack allows you to replay stages in the shortest possible time, while Adventure mode is the same deal, minus a time limit.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

SWITCHING SHADES: *Shifting World*'s biggest selling point is the ability to change the landscape by shifting polarity, jumping between black and white in order to solve the puzzles.

In terms of presentation, *Shifting World* is an improvement over *Shift*, but it's still a long way off being an impressive 3DS game. What's even more puzzling is that despite the modest visuals, the engine struggles to maintain a steady frame rate. The use of 3D is also underwhelming.

Shifting World's shortcomings could be forgiven slightly if it had been sold as a downloadable eShop release. There's very little meat on the bone here, and what is available is distinctly unpalatable; to package this up as a physical retail product strikes us as an almost criminal waste of plastic. *Shifting World* takes what was originally an appealing concept and removes all sense of enjoyment and satisfaction. Stick with the cheaper and more focused mobile precursor.

VERDICT 5/10
A NICE IDEA RUINED BY SLOPPY EXECUTION

INIS RETURNS TO PROPER RHYTHM-ACTION AT LAST

Symphonica

DETAILS
FORMAT: iOS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Square Enix
DEVELOPER: iNiS
PRICE: £10.49
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

AS GOOD AS: NODAME CANTABILE
WORSE THAN: THEATRHYTHM FINAL FANTASY

After a few dark years spent toiling away on *Lips* and *The Black Eyed Peas Experience*, the *Gitaroo Man* and *Ouendan* developer is back with the sort of 'proper' rhythm-action games that endeared us to the studio in the first place. Following *Demon's Score*, a weird blend of *Ouendan* and *The House Of The Dead*, comes iNiS's second iOS screen-tapper, *Symphonica*.

Less like *Ouendan* and more like Square Enix's *Theatrhythm Final Fantasy*, *Symphonica* plays out with a series of notes that move across the screen from right to left rather than appearing at random points. As such, it's a relatively easy rhythm-action game aimed at newcomers, which may explain why it takes so long to get going. Due to the multitouch nature of iOS, *Symphonica* sports a wide variety of inputs, including taps, holds, swipes, arcs and swift, repetitive taps – each of which is given more variety either by adding two-finger variations or by combining two inputs together, like a long hold finished with a swiping flourish. All of which, on the later levels at least, makes for some pretty complex gameplay requiring fast reactions and/or lots of practice. But it does take a long time to get to that point, especially when each chapter is padded out with small practice tunes before you get to the big centrepiece at the end.

Symphonica's track listing is troublesome, too. The classical music theme means that you're obviously getting top-quality tunes throughout, but these orchestrations have appeared in a thousand low-budget rhythm-action games before – from *Mad Maestro* to *Boom Boom Rocket* – and, therefore, *Symphonica* lacks a clear identity. This isn't helped at all by the story, which uses generic anime character designs in a traditional talking-heads narrative that's about as far away as you can get from the brilliant interactive comic strips of *Ouendan* and *Elite Beat Agents*. Before too long, you'll realise that the story has zero importance or relevance to the game and will find yourself skipping through the dialogue to get to the gameplay. Which is fine enough in theory, but this is iNiS we're talking about. With stages like *Gitaroo Man*'s *Legendary Theme* and *Ouendan*'s *Over The Distance*, the developer has proved to be one of the most adept at making you care about story and characters in a genre not typically associated with such traits.

On a mechanical level at least, *Symphonica* is a decent rhythm-action game, with lots to keep your fingers busy across a variety of proven tunes, but the overall presentation and attention to detail lacks the x factor that iNiS is best known for. Yes, it's a comeback, but it's not quite the comeback we hoped for.

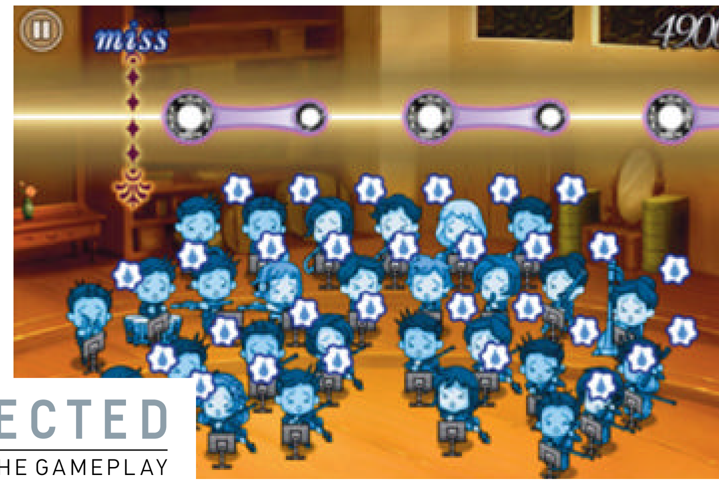
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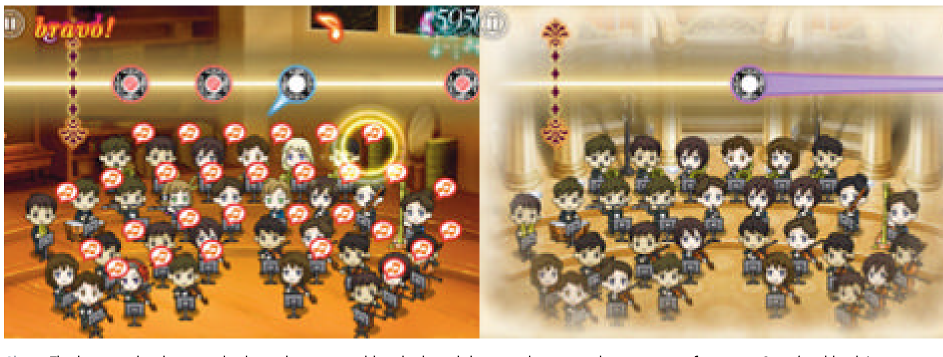
EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY

ELEVEN NOTES: The initial download is free and comes with a tutorial and a single chapter, which is very little gameplay. You can buy more in chunks, but we'd recommend paying £10.49 for the full 12 parts.



Above: Yes, there's a story. But that's all you need to know.





Above: The in-song visuals are as basic as they come, with only the subtlest emoticons reacting to your performance. *Ouendan* this ain't.

VERDICT 6/10
CLASSICAL, NOT CLASSIC

Below: Another meter, the Tension gauge, increases gradually throughout each game. Once full, you'll be able to trigger Hero Time, which allows you to plough through opponents at will for a short time. There's no guarantee it will lead to a goal, though.





GIVES A WHOLE NEW MEANING TO 'STOPPAGE TIME'

Inazuma Eleven Strikers

For better or worse, *Inazuma Eleven Strikers* is a fitting adaptation of the anime series. It's an accurate depiction of the characters CITV viewers will be familiar with, not to mention their fantastical abilities. And it certainly looks the part, with a charming animated intro and dramatic, *Dragon Ball*-esque cutaways for every special move. Sadly, it's also mind-numbingly repetitive, while its games don't so much ebb and flow as stop and start, the rhythm of play broken up by more interruptions than a particularly fussy referee in charge of Stoke vs Millwall.

Essentially, it's *Sega Soccer Slam* all over again: an outlandish game of arcade football that bears only a vague resemblance to the real thing. Of course, Wii owners have played something similar already in the form of *Mario Strikers Charged Football*, and unfortunately *Inazuma Eleven* suffers in comparison. Each superhuman skill – of which there are many, from shots to dodges and tackles – is accompanied by a brief cut-scene that can't be turned off, nor skipped. It might not have been a problem if regular play wasn't so underpowered; certain through balls and crosses can lead to powerful volleys if you get the timing right, but the keeper will parry the shot to safety almost every time.

Meanwhile, players move at a troublingly languid pace, and while a sprint button improves things slightly, it can only be used sparingly, players slumping to a near-standstill after a lung-busting run. Moreover, the Inazuma gauge, which determines a player's ability to pull off special moves, seems to refill much slower than your AI rival's. At times you're helpless to stop opponents from slaloming through your defence, not least because the positioning of your players is often woeful.

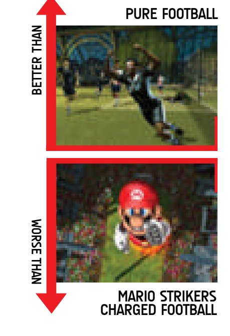
Surprisingly, there's no story mode whatsoever. Instead, alongside Exhibition and Tournament options, there's Club Room – essentially, a simplistic take on *PES*'s Master League. Here, defeating rivals allows you to scout members of their team to add to your custom squad, while a selection of simple training mini-games allow you to forge stronger bonds between players that power up your team and offer access to special co-operative skills. Here, a second player can join in to assist from the sidelines, shaking the Wii Remote to push players forward or back, or using the pointer to create recovery zones that fill a player's Inazuma gauge.

Even so, Club Room isn't quite enough to make *Strikers* worth recommending for solo gamers. Too frustrating for youngsters, too inconsequential for older players, *Strikers* has its moments, but they're almost all when two or three friends are involved. Even so, the Wii has many better multiplayer games to consider before this, and if you're in the market for an arcade football game with AI opponents that cheat relentlessly, a certain plumber already has you covered.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Wii
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Level-5
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: PURE FOOTBALL



WORSE THAN: MARIO STRIKERS CHARGED FOOTBALL

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

CUT IT OUT: An option to skip cutaways would be welcome, or even to play a game without special moves. Perhaps it'd be a blander game without them, but it'd be less annoying, too.





VERDICT 5/10

INAZUMA FAN? STICK WITH THE RPGS

MAKE IT SO… GOOD

FTL: Faster Than Light*

From the moment we saw *FTL: Faster Than Light* described on Kickstarter as "*Firefly* by way of *Spelunky*", we knew we just had to try it. Several hours of play later, it more than lives up to that promise…

If the description means nothing to you, think of *FTL* as a 'roguelike' – the turn-based, randomly generated dungeon RPGs that emphasise chance-based loot drops, unexpected encounters and permadeath in a quest that's all about making smart use of your resources in incredibly difficult circumstances. Only instead of a lone wanderer in a dungeon, you're the captain of a small starship, forging a course through uncharted space to deliver a crucial MacGuffin back to the Federation.

Along the way you'll visit planets and other celestial bodies, randomly encountering both friends and foe – the latter of which is where the meat of the game resides. Ship-to-ship fights play out in a system not unlike *Final Fantasy*'s Active Time Battle – a real-time system in which every move has its own activation speed and cooldown time. No battle is easily won, and the victor is often not the one with the best weapons but the one who better deals with problems when they occur. A fire breaks out in the engine room, for example. Do you send in a remote droid to extinguish it, at the cost of crucial energy resources, or do you open the airlocks and select doors to take all the oxygen out of the room, but at obvious risk to your crew? When targeting an enemy ship, do you go for general damage by sweeping lasers all the way across the hull, or do you strike at an Achilles heel, focusing damage on their weapons systems or shield generator?

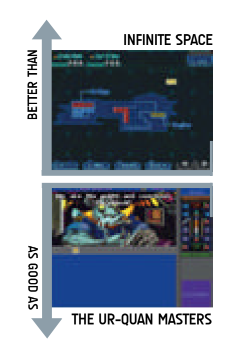
Customisation plays a huge part in your mission, from the way you expand the features of your ship to its power allocations and even the sort of crew you assemble. Every choice has a huge impact on the way your own personal story unfolds, and makes no two games of *FTL* play out in the same way. Which is good, really, because there's no way you'll make it to the end of the game without dying on your first go.

It may be rendered in the sort of simple visuals the Amiga 500 could churn out in its sleep, but when you're playing *FTL*, that's not what you see. The deep tactics and endless possibilities of its systems make it totally immersive, and you really do feel like the captain of a starship, a cross between Malcolm Reynolds and James T Kirk, juggling those "divert all power to the shields" moments with true role-playing decisions as you use your wits to make it through the seedy criminal underbelly of deep space.

In short, *FTL: Faster Than Light* is one of the best RPGs of the year, and if it's not on your radar, you should probably make sure you even have a radar at all…

DETAILS

FORMAT: Mac
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: China
PUBLISHER: Subset Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: $9.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: 2GHz processor, 1GB RAM, 175MB HDD
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

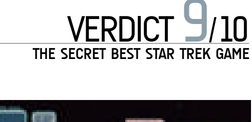


FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

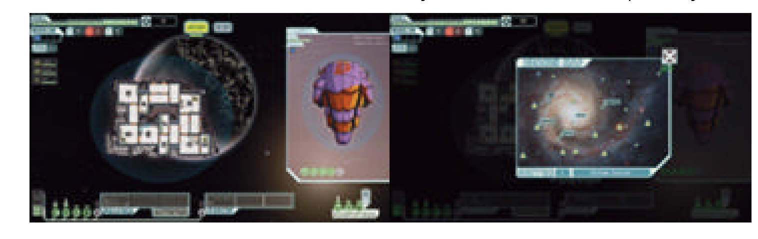
GOOD SHIP: An unbelievable level of strategy and customisation, and a flexible play style, makes this one of the strongest RPGs of the year, all wrapped up in an original setting.





VERDICT 9/10

THE SECRET BEST STAR TREK GAME



Below: You're pursued by an enemy fleet, meaning you have to shift it to the next system and won't have time to explore every beacon.





Above: Get far enough through the game and you start to unlock other types of ships. Not only do they have different layouts, but their formations and crew give them entirely different tactical considerations.



Left: In a neat touch, if you take part in the Shogunate quest to unlock the language school, the Westerners will stop using "?!?!!!???!??" as their only dialogue. Unfortunately, that then leads to discovering that they're actually all really racist.

PROOF THAT EAST REALLY IS EAST, AND THAT'S NOT ABOUT TO CHANGE

Way Of The Samurai 4

It's weird to think that *Way Of The Samurai 4* has an opportunity to really prove something to the world, to tell everyone that Japanese gaming is more than just anime dating sims and obscure JRPGs. We say this because the latest from Acquire is set during the end of the Edo period – a tumultuous time for Japan where visitors from the West impacted the politics of the island country, turning brother against brother as sides were chosen for the 'right' way to preserve its legacy. Sounds pretty compelling for a videogame, right?

Unfortunately, we've set *Way Of The Samurai 4* up for a bit of a fall. If you want that kind of narrative depth, look elsewhere – *Total War: Shogun 2 – Fall Of The Samurai*, for example – because in *WOTS4* you're little more than a samurai racing around in his underwear, picking fights just so he has something to do.

Admittedly, this unique setting does tie in to the overarching gameplay, with five distinct factions in the civil war available for your samurai to befriend. Whether you choose to side with the isolationist xenophobes, looking to stop the corrupting Western influence; the Shogunate on the opposite side of the war; or even the foreigners themselves is entirely up to you, and every decision impacts the ultimate endgame. It's very reminiscent of *Dead Rising* in that sense, though admittedly with much less subtlety. Events can occur around the fairly limited landscape, and it's up to you to find them, react to them and, eventually, pick a side.

Again, we're probably making it sound more appealing than it is; make no mistake, this is a poor game. Animations are clunky, the engine can't handle even these basic graphics, and it's never really clear what you're supposed to be doing. Even combat, which is probably the most positive aspect, is simplistic beyond belief and doesn't make the game much fun.

We won't deny there's some peculiar pleasure to be found in the compulsion of being a samurai with free rein to do whatever you want – even slice up passers-by for the hell of it – but the actual game pinning it all together is just rubbish, quite frankly. Perhaps we're suffering from a samurai-fuelled form of Stockholm syndrome.

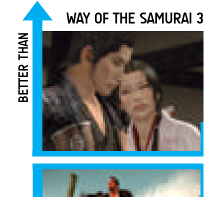
For the ten of you who actually pay attention to the series, there are some improvements. A retry function means you can worry less about being caught off guard, an event planner helps track your personal route through the story's different situations, and combat has seen tweaks and improvements so it's not quite as difficult to get to grips with as the previous *Way Of The Samurai* games. One day Acquire may just realise the unique concept it has on its hands here, but until then it's business as usual.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS3
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: NIS America
DEVELOPER: Acquire
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

WAY OF THE SAMURAI 3





DEAD RISING

WORSE THAN

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

ONCE MORE WITH FEELING: The idea of replaying to experience different parts should be compelling, and would work well with this particular setting. Acquire could have capitalised on its franchise here.



VERDICT 4/10

SURELY YOU DIDN'T EXPECT MORE FROM THIS?



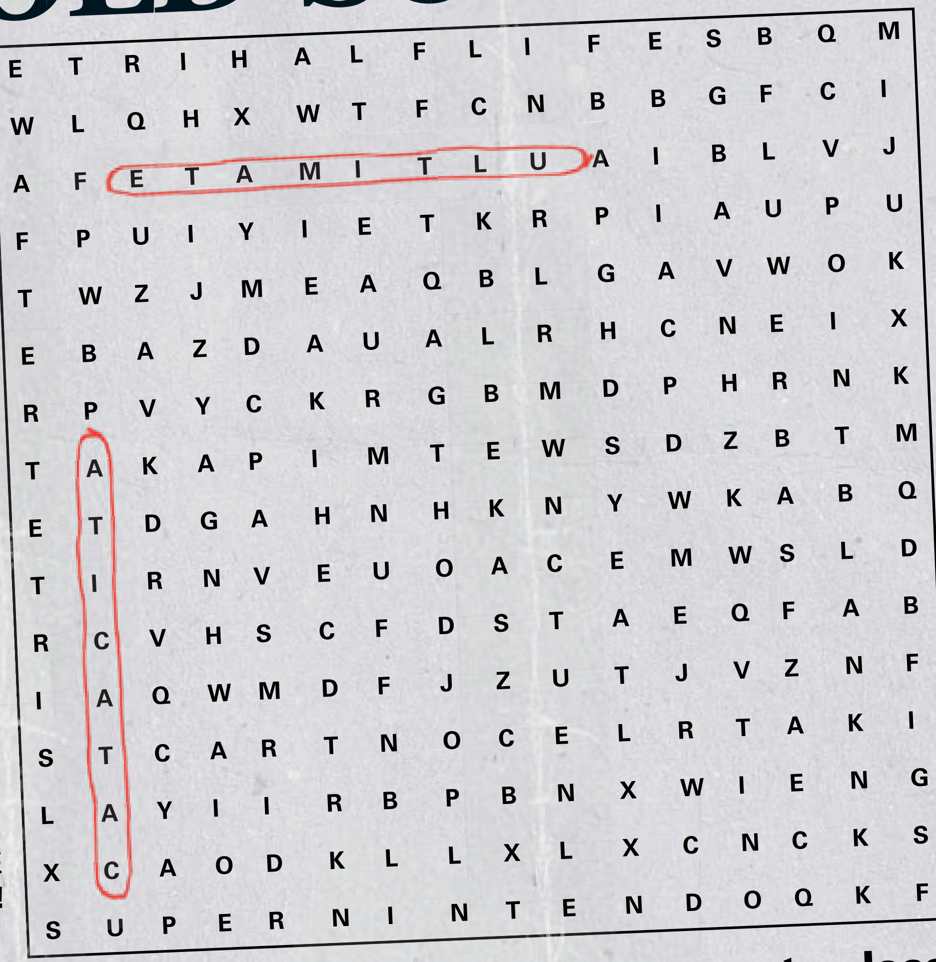
Above: The ability to customise your samurai's outfit can lead to some hilarious situations like this. Honestly, we wanted to buy the matching trousers.



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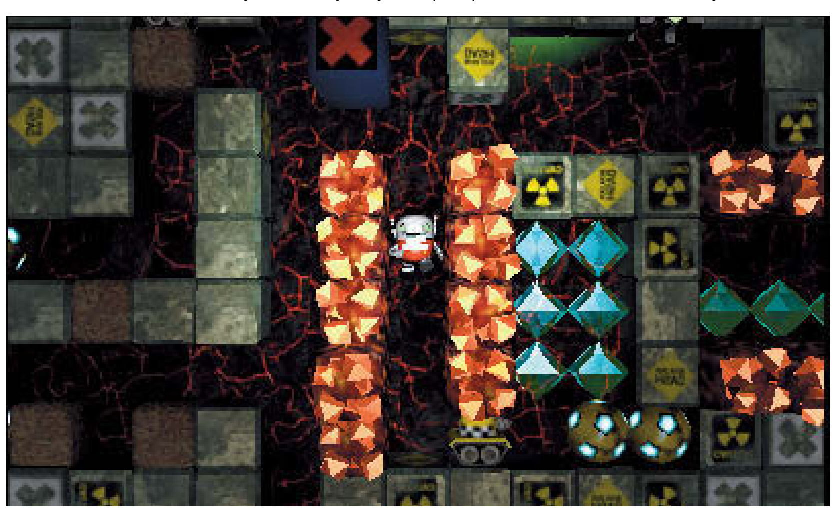
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Below: Most levels require you to collect a set number of crystals before you can use the exit. Any additional crystals you can pick up within the time limit will all add to your overall score.





CAN FIRST STAR SOFTWARE'S 28-YEAR-OLD FRANCHISE IMPRESS THE 3D GENERATION?

Boulder Dash-XL 3D

When the original *Boulder Dash* was released in 1984, it instantly impressed gamers thanks to its ingenious level design, clever use of physics, and the fact that there was nothing else quite like it on the market. That was 28 years ago, however, which is an eternity in videogame terms, and while this latest *Boulder Dash* remains enjoyable to play – it's based on a classic template, after all – many of today's gamers will be wanting a lot more for their cash.

The biggest problem with *Boulder Dash-XL 3D* is that it's pretty much an identical port of the Xbox Live Arcade game, which was released in 2011 and is currently available for a fraction of the price. Ludosity has added a new Score Attack mode, introducing larger playing areas and the ability to chain scores together for big points, but only four stages are actually included. That leaves the 3D as the only other reason for upgrading to this new version, and sadly it's not worth the effort, with the effect just bringing a slight sensation of depth that adds nothing to the overall gameplay experience.

It's fortunate, then, that the original Xbox Live Arcade game had so much content to it, as no one could deny that *Boulder Dash-XL* gives you plenty to sink your teeth into. Arcade mode offers 100 different levels to battle and introduces all sorts of new mechanics that range from speed-ups to teleporters, telescopic arms, and keys that unlock specific sections of a cave. There's also a bonus multiplier that rewards you for picking up a continuous string of crystals, which is a nice touch and pushes you to take more risks while playing.

Puzzle mode adds a selection of devious puzzles that require you to collect every single crystal before reaching the exit, while Zen mode allows you to simply navigate the caves at your leisure without fear of a ticking time limit. You can also access any level, allowing you to practise some of the harder stages of the Arcade mode without fear of death. Last but by no means least is Retro mode, which effectively looks like the original 8-bit game but is mechanically quite different, due to the slower pace. This in itself will annoy hardcore fans but will be all but ignored by anyone else.

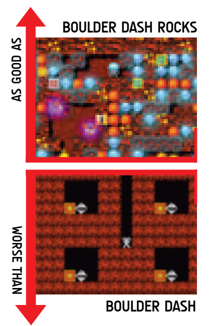
It's a decent enough package, but ultimately there's very little difference between the available modes that are on offer. It's certainly passable for a digital release, but less impressive on the 3DS, even with a sub-£20 price point.

Boulder Dash-XL 3D is not a terrible game, and digging through caves in search of diamonds remains as enjoyable now as it was 28 years ago. It's just a shame that there's so little else to do in it.

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Sweden
PUBLISHER: Reef Entertainment
DEVELOPER: Ludosity
PRICE: £19.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

AS GOOD AS — BOULDER DASH ROCKS

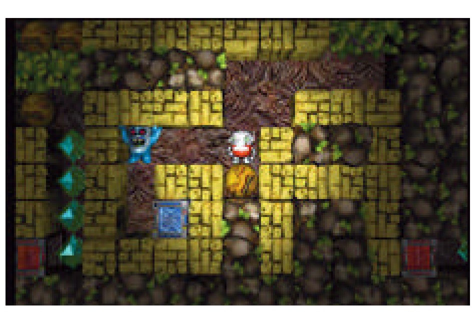


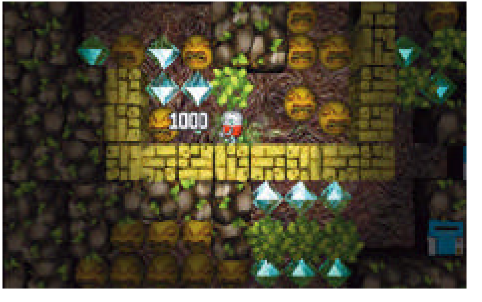
WORSE THAN — BOULDER DASH

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

SCORES ON THE DOORS: If you're going to make a game that revolves around high scores, at least let players compete online. In this day and age there's no excuse to not feature online leaderboards.





Below: One nice touch of *Boulder Dash-XL* is that it rewards you for continually collecting crystals. Careful planning allows you to net high scores.



VERDICT 5/10
A FUN GAME, SHOWING ITS AGE



WHY I ♥...

Half-Life 2

BRIAN HORTON, CRYSTAL DYNAMICS

*“**Half-Life 2** is my favourite game of all time and it probably will be for many, many years to come. The reason is the seamless vision. The gameplay and the world, the way it’s rendered, and the story that you go through is completely seamless. It’s by far, I think, one of the most important landmark videogames in our history.”*



> "The gameplay and the world, the way it's rendered, and the story that you go through is completely seamless"
>
> **BRIAN HORTON, CRYSTAL DYNAMICS**

Sandford Village of the Year 2006

ZOMBIE eat flesh.

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RETRO

>.'WITH A HEAD THIS BIG, THAT'S NO JOKE'

NO.129 NOVEMBER 2012



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XBOX VS GAMECUBE VS PS2
This time it's war!
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The full horror revealed
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NINTENDO DS
Is Nintendo redefining handheld gaming?
Criterion proves there's no s
HEAVEN SENT?
Why Microsoft's greatest console is the saviour of videogaming
We reveal the Star Wars Univ
INTERVIEW
SAFETY IN NUMBERS



BEHIND THE SCENES

GAMES™

It's games™'s tenth birthday this issue, so you can forget classic videogames for a month. Let's take a rare look at the making of a classic – if we do say so ourselves – magazine…

IT'S HARD TO talk about the inception of **games™** without talking about what came before. Multiformat games magazines had existed long before November 2002, after all. Britain's own *Computer & Video Games* was the world's first games magazine, created in November 1981, and a slew of imitators and successors had naturally followed. Over 20 years later, a Paragon Publishing pitch document for a new multiformat games magazine clearly outlined what **games™** would be in relation to those that had come before it. **games™** knew what it wanted to be, and it knew what it didn't. Previous attempts under Paragon – the long since forgotten *Games World* and *X-Gen* – were clearly not the way to go. Instead, the document suggested a "weighty wedge of hardcore gaming heaven" that combined the size and passion of Japan's *Famitsu* with the "quality and perspective" of a certain other adult-oriented multiformat mag still in circulation today, only without the "pretentious attitude".

games™ would also take inspiration from *Arcade* and *Maximum*, arguably the most successful publications at combining passion with intelligence, if not the most successful when it came to sales. The Retro section – a magazine within a magazine, designed to appeal to the mature readership who had grown up with videogames for two or three decades, just like the staff – cemented Paragon's "first credible attempt at an adult-oriented multiformat games magazine."

"**games™** didn't want to be a kids' games magazine," says Mark Kendrick, who was responsible for coming up with the look of the mag and was part of the original team, including games journalism veterans Damian Butt, Nick Roberts and Simon Phillips, who conceived of the publication. As such, everything about the magazine's appearance was tweaked to stand out from the crowd and appeal to mature readers. From the unusual paper size to the way the magazine felt to hold, it was very deliberately designed to feel grown-up yet unpretentious. Even the price – a simple, bold £4 rather than the expected, and deceptive, £3.99 – made a purposeful statement about the mag. continued>.



Some things, however, weren't so deliberate. Like the name. The 'games' part is obvious. As the original pitch outlined, this was to be a publication that cared only about the core subject matter; no DVD, music or book reviews. Just games. But what about the '™'? Over the past decade, that's a question we've been asked time and time again. Some like to say that it stands for 'The Magazine', but the truth has remained a mystery to even the publication's staff until now.

"Every magazine we produce has a very small '™' attached to them because we trademark their titles," says Kendrick. "But there isn't one on **games™** because, originally, the title was just 'games'. So I started messing around with a 'games' logo and put a '™' on it because that was standard across all our magazines, and what we tended to do in QuarkXPress at the time was scale up the logo, and when we did that the ™ scaled up at the same time. It sort of stuck. I presented it as **games™** on a dummy cover and that was that."

"THE INITIAL PLANNING of **games™** was incredibly hush-hush, from what I remember, so I don't think I heard about it until they were actually putting the team together," says Martin Mathers, who was deputy editor on the first issue and now works at Nintendo Europe in Frankfurt. As the initial planning document notes, a 180-page magazine, covering every format as well as the medium's extensive past, needs a big team of expert staff to do the best possible job. So such a team was assembled.

At the top of the **games™** tree were Nick Roberts as managing editor and Simon Phillips as group editor. Both had moved to Paragon from Rapide in 1999 when the publisher had gone bust after sinking a reported £100,000 into producing demo discs for the first issue of unofficial PSone publication *Station*. Phillips, who got his start on N64 mag *Total 64*, had overseen both *Dreamcast Magazine* and *CUBE*, and was well placed to oversee **games™**'s passionate, multiformat approach. Roberts, meanwhile, dated back to *Crash* and *Zzap!64* publisher Newsfield, where he'd worked with Mark Kendrick. The pair naturally made the old-fashioned Retro section their baby. Mathers had his big break as a 'Videator' on Sky's *GamesMaster* competitor *Games World*, before moving to Paragon to work in magazines. "At the time, I was on *CUBE* working under Simon and alongside Chandra Nair," he recalls. "We were on level pegging and there was always healthy competition as to who would move above the other first. As it turned out, though, we both got the dep ed gig at the same time, just on different mags. I think I got the better end of the deal…"

Keith Edwards joined the team as games editor from Xbox mag *XBM*, further complementing the magazine's multiformat remit, while relative newcomer Luke Albigés, now one of the longest-serving members of the **games™** cast, was hand-picked for the role of staff writer. "I was working on a solutions magazine at the time, which was fun obviously," Albigés tells us. "I'd originally interviewed for a Game Boy Advance magazine and ended up being put on guides. I'd done some freelance for *XBM* and the powers that be obviously liked

The staff really enjoyed poking fun at Peter Molyneux in this recurring element, but we don't think the man himself was too pleased. We're good friends with Molyneux now, of course, even if games like *Curiosity: What's Inside The Cube* are more open to parody than ever.

THE ™ HAS BEEN A MYSTERY TO EVEN THE PUBLICATION'S STAFF UNTIL NOW

"IN MY POINT OF VIEW, MOST OF THE RACING GAMES ON THE MARKET AT THE MOMENT CONCENTRATE TOO MUCH ON REALISM – I WANTED TO CREATE SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT."
YOSHIHIRO SUDO

YOSHIHIRO SUDO

CAPCOM JAPAN

He might not look it, but Yoshihiro Sudo is a happy man – not just because he works for one of the biggest and most well-known Japanese games developers around today, but also because his new game, *Auto Modellista*, has jumped straight to the top of the Dengeki sales charts. Being the best-selling game around might not sound like much, but it's a big deal in Japan; in a country where the RPG is king, getting to the top spot with a game in a decidedly Western genre is quite an achievement.

Of course, while *Auto Modellista* might be a racing game by definition, the last thing you could brand it as is a Western game. Trust Capcom (and more importantly, the man behind such unique-styled games such as the over-the-top beat-'em-up *Marvel VS Capcom 2* and fighting revolution *Power Stone 2*) to create a driving game with typically Japanese flair; the world's first reality-based cel-shaded racer.

"In my point of view, most of the racing games on the market at the moment concentrate too much on realism," says Sudo-san. "I believe that, on occasion, this can be detrimental to gameplay – I wanted to create something completely different. We pursued fresh and innovative ideas and eventually came up with the cel-shaded graphical technique you see now."

There might be plenty of cel-shaded racing games available these days (what with cartoon style being the current 'in thing'), but *Auto Modellista* is the first to combine cel-shaded graphics with realistic physics. If you need a comparison to get your head around the concept, think *Ridge Racer* meets *Jet Set Radio* with the thrill factor whacked up a couple of notches. Surprisingly though for a game of this nature, the cars are real ones rather than fictional brands. Each vehicle in the game is based on an actual model and looks exactly like its real-life counterpart – albeit in cel-shaded form.

"The cars in this game have all been approved by the relevant car manufacturers," assures Sudo-san. "Actually, most manufacturers were very excited by the prospect of seeing their cars recreated in Capcom's 'artistoon' style."

Cel-shading isn't the only feather in Auto Modellista's cap, however; the game is also the first racer to take advantage of PlayStation2's recently acquired online capabilities. Unfortunately, this aspect of the game hasn't quite grabbed the attention of Japanese gamers as much it could have done – even Sudo-san himself admits that "currently in Japan, most gamers are playing off-line," although he believes that future game environments will lure more gamers online. Being the PS2's first online racing game, you'd expect Capcom to have run into trouble when trying to put the whole thing together. Interestingly, this wasn't the case.

"We started by resolving the infrastructure issue territory by territory, but we didn't face many problems regarding the online creation side," confesses Sudo-san. "However, as a producer and a member of Capcom staff, I would like to thank everyone involved both externally and internally who has supported us through the installation of *Auto Modellista*'s online environment." A humble comment, for someone with so many successes behind him.

With *Auto Modellista* now due out in the UK some time in early 2003 on PS2, things are quickly moving on for Sudo-san and his team – Capcom has already confirmed the development of a sequel. Although there's no confirmed format for it, Sudo-san's comment that "this title is not PS2 exclusive" leads us to believe that we can expect an Xbox and maybe even GameCube version somewhere along the road. Not surprisingly though, there are also other projects in the wings awaiting Sudo-san's attention. Sadly, one of them isn't a much-desired follow-up to *Power Stone 2* ("We don't have any plans regarding this at this moment," says Sudo-san, refusing to be drawn on the subject) but whatever comes next, you can guarantee it'll be something worth your attention…

games™ 021

■ For this feature on the weirder side of gaming, the staff took inspiration from a pile of Asian gifts and sweets a Paragon designer had just brought back from holiday. The robot character shown in green, who also appears in early issues of **Retro Gamer**, is actually just one of the 'letters' of a dingbat font.

what they'd seen and came a-calling, saying, 'You're going to be part of the launch team for **games™**.'"

■■■ Finally, the Retro section would be edited by Simon Cann who, according to Albigés, was so into old games that he "pretty much ignored modern games entirely and was just left in his cupboard to do retro". On the whole of the original team, Albigés concludes, "It was like a rock band. Everyone brings something different to it and the end product is more than the individual pieces. After a while, especially on a magazine like this that has its own identity, you start to fall in line with the voice of the publication."

Indeed, one of the earliest intentions for **games™** was that, unlike most other videogames magazines, it would use the expertise of the individual staff members but not their personalities. "Writers will not be credited," reads the original outline. "There is one voice – **Games TM**." As such, there would be no photographs or illustrations of staff grinning out from every page and the editorial style would follow suit, presenting a well-argued critical tone, particularly in reviews. Though each game would be scored out of ten, you get the impression that the team wanted to downplay the number's importance in favour of the review text itself, and it's not a surprise to hear that if the team could have got away with it then scores would have been abandoned altogether.

"There were always discussions about dropping the scores," says Mathers. "I hate scores – they cancel out all the hard work that the writers do by placing an arbitrary number on the end, meaning people don't have to spend time reading the bit you actually worked hard on. Sadly, that's an argument that I was never going to win."Mathers agrees, however, that marking out of ten was a good compromise. "100 is too much and five leaves too much room for everything continued>.

Design mockups

■ WHILE THESE may appear to be alternate issue one designs, they're more like issue zero mock-ups, using art from existing titles *CUBE* and *XBM* to quickly define the look of the magazine. Note the thin '™', giving away its origins as an actual trademark symbol.











ANATOMY OF A PAGE

Art director Mark Kendrick breaks down the DNA of an original games™ review page

■ This big but subtle 'g' logo was there to remind you which mag you were reading.

■ One hard rule was that game art would not appear in reviews. Only the player's experience was relevant in these pages.

■ A lot of the fonts in the magazine and on its cover were inspired by Eighties album covers, specifically Depeche Mode's *Some Great Reward* and Gary Numan's *Telekon*.

■ Unlike other magazines, there would be no interruptions to the review text. No screens to break it up, no jokey crossheads. The idea was to take criticism seriously.

■ Paul Ridley, one of the designers on **Play** and now at *Golf Monthly*, drew these icons for the mag.

■ Captions used a condensed font so that more words could be squeezed in. Where other magazines used captions for a lame joke, **games**™'s would offer yet more info about the game.

■ These 'floating boxes' were added after Damian Butt requested elements that would be identifiable as **games**™ "fingerprints". One was actually called 'Fingerprint' as a joke and has remained in the magazine ever since.

■ Another element added to make reviews stand out, though we have to admit these were inspired by a similar idea in Steve Jarratt's *Total!* magazine. Thanks, Steve!

■ There was a lot of discussing about scoring at the time and we considered doing something weird like marks out of four or seven, but it ended up being out of 10. We wanted it to be prominent without dominating the page.

REVIEW | STREET FIGHTER ALPHA 3 | GAME BOY ADVANCE



STREET FIGHTER ALPHA 3

A NEAR-PERFECT DREAMCAST PORT ON A HANDHELD? GET OUTTA HERE...

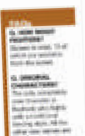
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VERDICT 8/10

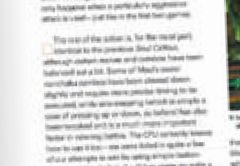
REVIEW | SOUL CALIBUR 2 | ARCADE

DESPITE NAMCO'S RECENT LACKLUSTRE TITLES, THE JAPANESE GIANT PULLS ONE OUT OF THE BAG FOR THIS SEQUEL

SOUL CALIBUR 2



ENHANCED



HOME EXTRAS IN THE ARCADE









ONE PERSON PROUDLY DECLARED THAT WE'D BE CLOSED WITHIN SIX MONTHS

getting three out of five. The one thing we all agreed on and did our best to get over in the mag from day one is that five is average. Not seven. Five. If something got a seven, that still meant it was good."

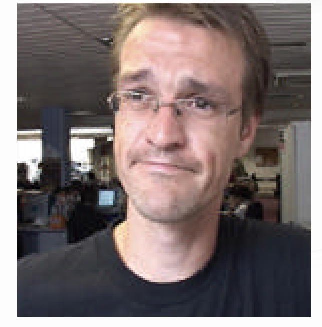
There were many features that made **games™** unusual among its peers, but if there's one thing that made it unique then it's certainly the Retro section, a staple part of the magazine that remains one of its most popular assets to this day. It's still special for many of the people who have worked on it over the years, but it's particularly important to Mark Kendrick, who fashioned it after the Newsfield publications on which he got his start. "Right from day one we wanted the Retro section to feel like you were getting a free magazine with **games™**," he recalls. "We wanted to do it like an old games magazine. And which retro mags are loved more than *Crash* and *Zzap!*? So I came up with a bastardised version of the *Crash* logo, called Retro, by taking the original *Crash* Illustrator graphics that I still had. It wasn't redrawn; I used the original materials from Newsfield. They were on an old Apricot floppy disk that I still have. Luckily, I had a Mac at the time that could still read floppies."

"The original idea," he continues, "was to do the pages just like the earliest issues of *Crash*, which were black and white with one spot colour, which was red, on what can only be described as bog paper. But although you'd think that was poor quality, it actually drove **games™**'s production costs way up. I also wanted the whole section to be done by hand rather than on a computer, but there weren't that many of us who knew how to do it. I remember making *Crash* by hand. I think I've still got the cut marks from the scalpels. It took the end of my finger off once and it's still a bit flat even now."

Personally, the **games™** staff is extremely grateful this never happened.

"If you look at the Retro section there were some hard and fast rules," Kendrick explains. "I wasn't the full-time designer on it; I was just setting it up for Lisa Johnson, who worked with me on the launch issue and took over from issue 2. She's brilliant, but she did have trouble getting her head around the limitations of what you can do by hand versus what you could do digitally. So I said, 'You can't have text that runs around a picture, you can only do certain percentages of colour, et cetera.' We tried to make it look authentic, even to the point where we got my original rotary pens from *Crash*, drew lines and scanned them in to use on the Retro pages. If you have a look you can still see those original hand-drawn lines. So the Retro section was a real labour of love."

The DPS shots came straight from editorial director Damian Butt, who wanted to celebrate the heritage of gaming in a feature that looked classy and luxurious.



Group editor Simon Phillips, taking a break during the production of issue 5.

Managing editor Nick Roberts. How did anything ever get done on those old Macs?

Finishing a launch issue of any magazine is always hard work, and **games™** was no exception. "It was pretty much bedlam," says Albigés. "Especially at launch, it's so important to have the best reviews, the best previews, the best interviews that when a good opportunity came along, you'd end up abandoning a lot of work to accommodate something new, so I probably ended up doing two magazines' worth of work that month."

Nevertheless, the mag was finished, and when the 180-page goliath came back from the printers its quality was immediately noticeable. "I don't think a lot of people were prepared for how weighty it felt, as well as the overall quality," says Kendrick. "We wanted to create something with classic editorial values that also felt like a luxury product, and I think we achieved that with issue 1. And it must have worked because ten years later we're still here. That's pretty good, innit?"

"I'm pretty sure most people loved it," adds Mathers. "The general games community definitely saw it as a good thing that there was an alternative to the one solitary 'adult' mag that already existed, so we got a lot of support and messages of encouragement from that side. Of course, there was plenty of flak to deal with too, mainly from the fans of *Edge*. I distinctly remember one person who proudly declared that we'd 'be closed within six months'. I still wish I could see that person now, if only to point and laugh at them."

CONVERSION CATASTROPHE

The world's most embarrassing console ports under the spotlight



SYSTEM FAILURE

Format: Commodore 64
Year: 1990
Publisher: US Gold
Developer: In-house



ORIGINAL RELEASE **Board:** Sega X Board **Year:** 1989 **Publisher:** Sega **Developer:** In-house

RELEASED IN 1989, *Line Of Fire* was an *Operation Wolf*-style gun game by Sega that starred two commandos on a mission to escape enemy territory after retrieving a stolen super machine gun from terrorists.

Though its story was your typical stuff, *Line Of Fire* stood out by virtue of its shooting action playing out from inside a series of different vehicles. As such, its sprite-scaling stages stuck rigidly to a set path but featured corners and rotational effects that made them feel slightly more organic and less like a series of rigid death corridors.

Though not a huge success, *Line Of Fire* was converted to most of the popular systems available on the market at the time. The most bizarre is Sega's own Master System port, as it transferred the story and gameplay into a top-down shooter – a strange decision when you consider that Sega's 8-bit console actually had one of the best home conversions of *Operation Wolf* around.

But even though Sega's conversion shares little in common with its arcade parent, it still isn't the most unpleasant version. That honour goes to US Gold's shocking C64 port, which beats it and all other conversions hands down in the naff stakes.

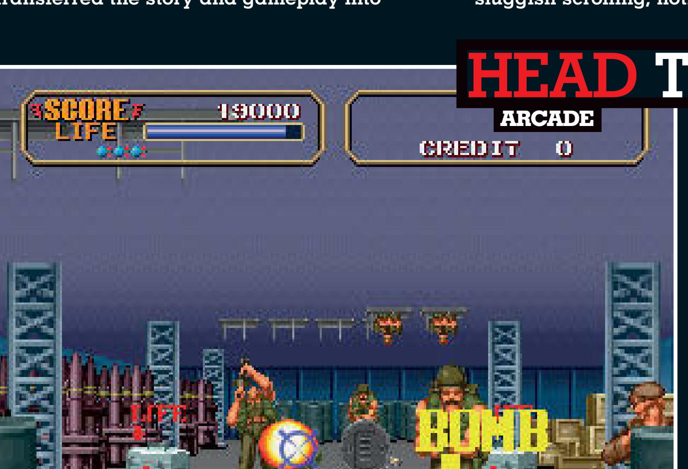
A bland, repetitive, ugly shambles, its gameplay pretty much involves shooting at the same single inert soldier until your will to live taps you on the shoulder in tears. With some of the worst visuals ever generated by a Commodore 64, combined with sluggish scrolling, noticeable sprite overlapping and dreary level design, it's difficult to imagine how a developer could do a worse job.

While it's pleasing that each stage from the arcade game is represented, though the first five stages look pretty much identical, it matters little when everything is done so badly and looks so hideous. The look of the enemies and bosses are especially laughable, and while the on-rails effect is fairly convincing in the indoor stages, even that falls apart once the action moves outside.

Due to their frenetic action and stages often having to push many large, animated sprites around the screen at once, arcade gun games were generally hard to replicate on the limited tech of 8-bit home computers. *Line Of Fire* is certainly a casualty of this ugly uphill battle that developers faced.

HEAD TO HEAD

ARCADE



C64



1

2

3

THE BREAKDOWN

1 For around 99 per cent of the time, you're just firing at the same static soldier sprite over and over. The developers did attempt to include the vehicles and bosses from the arcade game, but as you can clearly see from this image, they didn't try very hard. Seriously, what is this?

2 The graphics are shocking. The first stage looks like it takes place inside a storage centre, but just look how the game draws a jungle. To appreciate how ugly this conversion is, though, you really need to see it moving. Actually, don't bother.

3 *Line Of Fire* was an early rail shooter. Its levels had corners and its camera shifted around to make the action feel more dynamic. This port replicates both these things but fails in spectacular fashion. It just makes for moments of disorienting mess.

WHAT YOU SHOULD HAVE PLAYED IT ON

Format: **Amiga** Year: **1990** Publisher: **US Gold** Developer: **Creative Materials**



There aren't many conversions to choose from and all are pretty mediocre, to be honest. The Amiga port was probably the most faithful home version. Its graphics and enemy designs looked the part, and it also featured the arcade story screens. Still nothing to get too excited about, though.

1992 ------ 1995 ------ 1995 ------ 1997 ---

THE COMPLETE HI



■ Many declared it to be a simple *Super Mario 64* clone, but *Banjo-Kazooie* was an excellent game in its own right.

■ *Baldur's Gate* was a tremendous calling card for BioWare and proved that it was perfectly possible to make great games based on the *Dungeons & Dragons* universe.

■ *Half-Life* proved to be quite the debut for a little studio called Valve. Of course, the game's sequels would follow in a timely fashion…

■ The engine for Epic's *Unreal* was in development for three long years. It was the first example of the now-popular Unreal Engine and has spawned numerous sequels and spin-offs.

■ The Game Boy Color may not have been a huge step up over the Game Boy, but it proved to be another huge seller for Nintendo.

1998 WAS A year of change. Games were becoming ever more involved and complex, particularly on the PC, which was benefiting from powerful graphics cards and some genuinely fantastic games.

Epic's *Unreal* was a graphical tour-de-force that impressed anyone who laid eyes on it, while Valve's *Half-Life* and Looking Glass Studios' *Thief: The Dark Project* would prove that complex storytelling, memorable characters and innovative new gameplay mechanics could easily exist within the FPS template.

If 1998 was the year that powerful new hardware began to take hold, it was also the year when many 16-bit console owners realised that the jig was well and truly up for their systems of choice. Majesco carried on holding the torch for the Mega Drive, which Sega itself had abandoned the previous year, while the Brazil-based Tec Toy continued to support the ageing console with impressive adaptations like *Duke Nukem 3D*. Amazingly, Tec Toy also continued to support Sega's 8-bit Master System, which was a huge success in Brazil, with puzzler *Mickey's Ultimate Challenge* being one of the last games to appear on the console.



It was a similar situation for the Super Nintendo. While it continued to receive support in its homeland, particularly from Nintendo itself, it was obvious to many gamers that it was time to move to the next generation, where Nintendo and every other relevant publisher was currently battling it out. By 1998, the PlayStation and N64 were in their prime, with each console offering some truly amazing games across a wide variety of genres.

Sony's PlayStation was the most entrenched thanks to big hitters like *Resident Evil 2*, *Xenogears*, *Parasite Eve*, *Everybody's Golf*, *Metal Gear Solid* and *R-Type Delta*, managing to cater to all types of gamers. The Saturn, by comparison, was faring better in Japan thanks to shooters such as *Battle Garegga*, *DoDonPachi* and Treasure's superb *Radiant Silvergun*, but it was losing tremendous ground in the West.

Despite strong support from Emap's *Sega Saturn Magazine* and some great games in the form of *Panzer Dragoon Saga* and *Burning Rangers*, Sega's machine just couldn't compete against Sony, and it was sadly put out of its misery at the end of the year.

While the Saturn was on its last legs in the West – it would survive for two more years in Japan –

STORY OF GAMES

REVIEW 98

Nintendo's N64 was slowly picking up steam, delivering a wealth of interesting and innovative games that easily gave Sony's console a run for its money. *Banjo-Kazooie, Space Station Silicon Valley, Star Wars: Rogue Squadron, F-Zero X, 1080° Snowboarding, Body Harvest, Fighter's Destiny* and *Wetrix* offered something for everyone, and while Nintendo couldn't compete with Sony's mass penetration, its system could no longer be ignored.

Nintendo may have still been struggling in the home console market, but it was a completely different story in the handheld sector. The Game Boy had already seen off healthy competition from Atari's Lynx, NEC's PC Engine GT and Sega's Game Gear, and it had come out smelling of roses.

1998 would see Nintendo release a long-overdue colour version of its world-dominating handheld. The Game Boy Color was released in Japan on 21 October and launched with just four games: *Pocket Bomberman, Game & Watch Gallery 2, Centipede* and *Tetris DX. The Legend Of Zelda: Link's Awakening DX* followed in December, and despite only containing one new dungeon, it still proved to be a huge hit for Nintendo's new handheld.

The console itself wasn't that much more powerful than the original Game Boy, with many at the time seeing it as a simple stopgap until Nintendo released a more powerful handheld. Despite this, the machine did extremely well, particularly as it was backwards compatible with the entire Game Boy library. Many games also benefited from being played on the new console, although their palettes were nowhere near as impressive as dedicated colour titles, giving gamers a decent reason for upgrading to Nintendo's new machine. Nintendo wasn't the only first-party working on a new handheld, however, as both SNK and Bandai would launch their own challengers to its crown the following year.

The final big release of 1998 was arguably one of the most important, as it marked Sega's final entry in the console market. The Japanese company had already revealed earlier in the year that it was moving its attention away from the Saturn, and on 27 November Japanese gamers found out why. Sega had decided to leapfrog the 64-bit generation completely with the Dreamcast.

It launched with four titles: *Pen Pen TriIcelon, Godzilla Generations, July* and *Virtua Fighter 3tb.* Its biggest launch game, *Sonic Adventure,* failed to appear, though, with Sega instead releasing it on 24 December. Sega's fortunes seemed to be turning, with the Dreamcast getting off to an extremely strong start. It wasn't to last, though…

■ *Sonic Adventure*, the first 'proper' *Sonic* game since 1994's *Sonic 3*, technically impressed with its next-gen set pieces.

■ Treasure's stunning *Radiant Silvergun* proved that the small development teams were still adept at pushing systems to their limits.

■ Hideo Kojima's *Metal Gear Solid* created its own subgenre and turned its director into a superstar of Japanese gaming.

■ The follow-up to Acclaim's popular N64 FPS was one of the first titles to make extensive use of the N64's new RAM pack add-on.

■ The Dreamcast was incredibly powerful and looked like Sega's entry back into the big leagues.

DEVELOPER of the YEAR
Gregg Mayles

■ Mayles began his career at Rare, working on the *Donkey Kong Country* franchise, but he's probably best known for coming up with the excellent *Banjo-Kazooie*. The platformer-cum-adventure is structured in many ways like *Super Mario 64*, but features the ingenious pairing of two characters, which enabled the player to pull off a variety of different moves as the game progressed. In addition to working on the *Banjo* games, Mayles also worked on *Donkey Kong 64, Conker's Bad Fur Day* and *Star Fox Adventures*, and was instrumental in the success of *Viva Piñata*. He is currently Rare's creative director.



EXTENDED PLAY: **1998**

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: OCARINA OF TIME

Each month we select one of the most interesting or important games from our year in review…. This month, we reveal how Shigeru Miyamoto's first 3D Zelda game changed adventures forever

GREAT THINGS WERE expected from Nintendo's first 3D *Zelda*. After all, the series had already become a 2D benchmark on the NES and SNES, while *Super Mario 64* had redefined what gamers expected from 3D platformers. Suffice to say everyone was looking to see if Miyamoto and his talented team at Nintendo would be able to work the same magic. Everyone had nothing to worry about.

Play *Ocarina* today, which you can courtesy of the excellent 3DS remake, and its brilliance is as obvious as it was in 1998. Like *Super Mario 64* before it, *Ocarina Of Time* was a stunning showcase for the power of 3D, creating an utterly believable world that had the player wanting to explore every last inch of it.

It's well documented that the original *Legend Of Zelda* came about due to Miyamoto's love of exploring as a child, and the same sense of wonderment can be found in *Ocarina Of Time*. But now you're exploring huge mountains, bustling villages and mystical forests. It's a cliché in videogame terms to mention the impact of Hyrule Field, but few games are able to convey a sense of freedom in the same way that *Ocarina* managed.

Yes, there's an air of familiarity to *Ocarina Of Time*, but it's credit to Miyamoto and the rest of his team that they were able to fill it with so many magical moments. Travelling through time, freeing Epona, witnessing the death of the Great Deku Tree, your first meeting with Navi. *Ocarina Of Time* is filled with them, and they all combine to create a living world that you never want to leave.

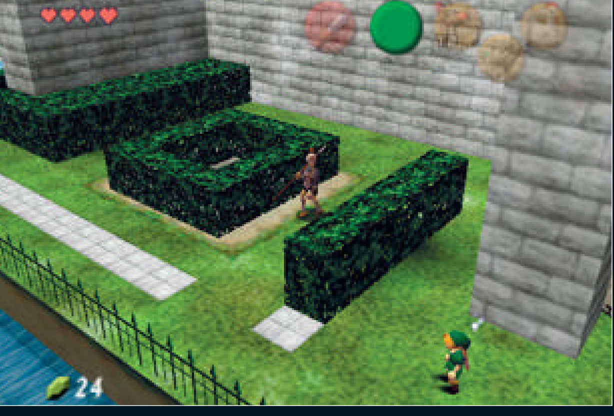
OCARINA OF TIME WAS A STUNNING SHOWCASE FOR THE POWER OF 3D

Ocarina Of Time wasn't just about great gaming moments, however, as it also boasted plenty of clever gameplay mechanics that would go on to change the genre. By far the most important was the Z-targeting, which enabled you to lock on to the game's many monsters and bosses with a simple button press and made combat an absolute joy. Being able to nip into first-person was also a massive boon, while the carefully designed inventory screens and huge bosses have been copied many times since, but rarely bettered by anyone, including Nintendo.

Ocarina Of Time may have been built on a tried and tested template, but few games have ever crossed from 2D to 3D so successfully and painlessly. It's a testament to Nintendo's adeptness within the genre that few other developers have been able to achieve the same level of success.



Even now, stepping out onto Hyrule Field manages to impress. We wish we could delete our memories so we could experience it all over again.

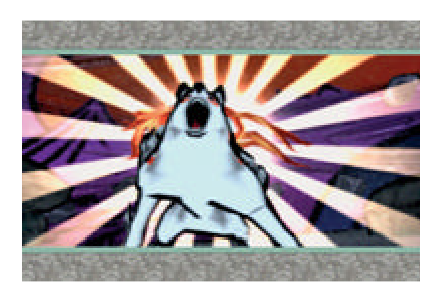


Not everything *Ocarina Of Time* did was amazing. The stealth sections were clumsy and frustrating, never matching the likes of *Metal Gear Solid*.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?



■ *OCARINA OF TIME* opened the floodgates for 3D adventure games, with numerous releases following the same formula with varying degrees of success. Some of the most notable have appeared in the last generation and the current, where the power of newer systems has helped to create more believable worlds to explore. Capcom's stunning PS2 game *Okami* remains one of the most notable and has been converted to the Wii along with an incoming HD update, but Vigil Games' *Darksiders* franchise and the quirky *3D Dot Game Heroes* are both important releases as well. It's Nintendo that has predictably had the most success, though, with *The Wind Waker*, *Twilight Princess* and *Skyward Sword* all copying what made *Ocarina Of Time* a success, but adding plenty of new ideas of their own. Needless to say, you can expect similar advancements when Link finally makes his debut on the Wii U.



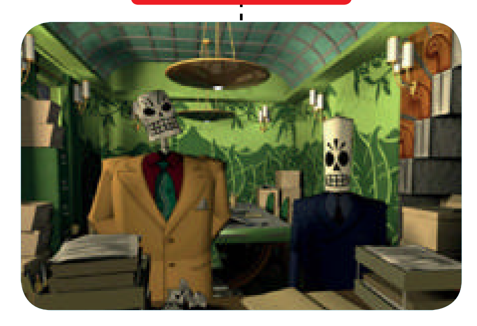
ALSO RELEASED THIS YEAR…

BALDUR'S GATE



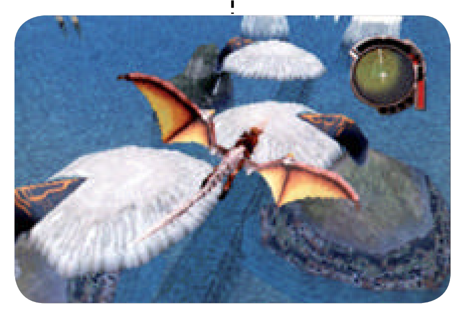
■ *BALDUR'S GATE* both helped put *Dungeons & Dragons* on the map as a viable computer game experience and also acted as a proper RPG calling card for BioWare. It set the direction for BioWare itself, with plenty of its DNA going on to appear in both the *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* franchises.

GRIM FANDANGO



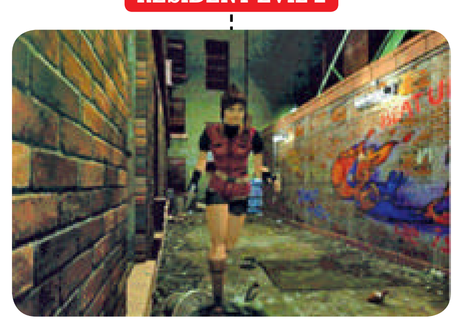
■ *GRIM FANDANGO* may have marked a move away from the ageing SCUMM engine, but it proved that LucasArts and Tim Schafer had lost none of their skill for creating fantastic adventures. Innovative, clever and endlessly funny, it remains one of Schafer's best games and is crying out for a sequel.

PANZER DRAGOON SAGA



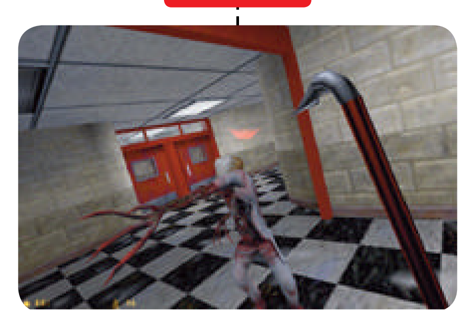
■ THERE'S A reason why Sega's third *Panzer* game consistently fetches high prices on eBay. It's quite simply one of the best RPGs available on the Saturn. Incredibly ambitious and fuelled by a tremendously moving story, it bolted on slick RPG mechanics to the core shooting to create an unforgettable gaming experience.

RESIDENT EVIL 2



■ A MANSION wasn't big enough to contain the plans Capcom had for its hit horror sequel, so the action shifted to the streets of Raccoon City. The move was a wise one, giving Capcom's follow-up a new protagonist and a cinematic scope that wouldn't be eclipsed until *Resident Evil 4*, some seven years later.

HALF-LIFE



■ WHEN VALVE'S FPS appeared, it redefined the genre. Stunning level design, an engaging story and memorable characters combined to create a thrilling experience. Gordon Freeman became one of gaming's greatest unsung heroes, while Valve proved that there could be more to the genre than just fragging hostiles.

COLLECTOR'S CORNER

Your monthly guide to collectable retro treasures



DETAILS

FORMAT: Nintendo Famicom
YEAR: 1986
PUBLISHER: Nintendo/JTB Traveland
DEVELOPER: Nintendo
EXPECT TO PAY: £300

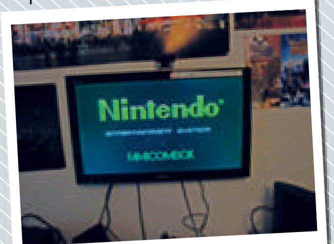


EXHIBIT A: The FamicomBox has its own unique startup screen. It's set to a black background with stars to give the impression that you're moving through space.



EXHIBIT B: Normal NES and Famicom cartridges don't work with the system. Only these special ones, distinguishable by their black colour and yellow stickers, are compatible.

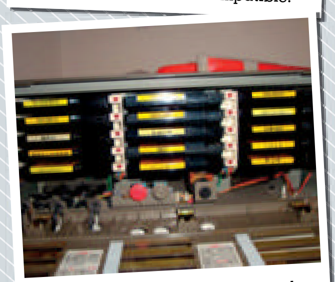


EXHIBIT C: Games are loaded in the front, and there are slots to store up to 15 carts. The units also come with three standard NES pads and a NES Zapper connected.

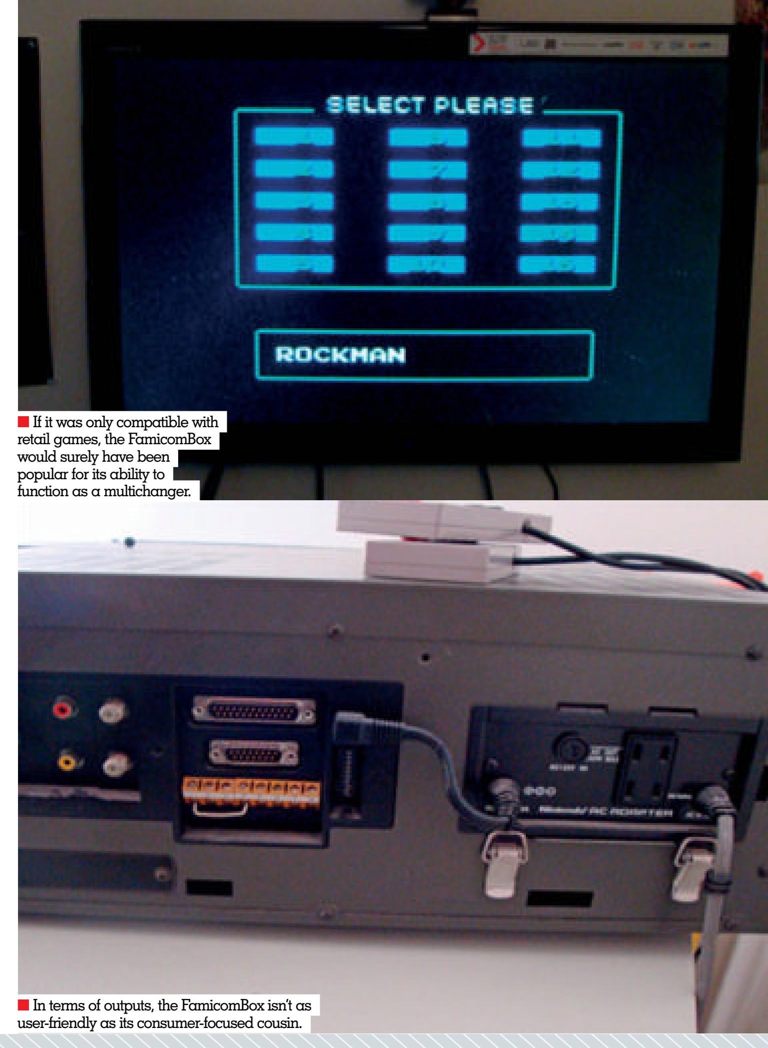
FAMICOMBOX

If you'd like games™ to feature you and your prized possession in Collector's Corner, email us at retro@imagine-publishing.co.uk

Why It's Rare

REGULAR READERS of this section may remember we featured a Super Famicom Box a little while back. The FamicomBox is basically its 8-bit forerunner, and is one of the most unusual and largest variants of Nintendo's iconic console ever to be manufactured.

Released exclusively in Japan by Nintendo, and as part of a joint venture with travel agency JTB Traveland, the imposing, metal-cased FamicomBox was a multi-cart demonstration system designed for use inside retail stores and hotels. Intended to expose the power of the console to shoppers and guests, the boxes had the capacity to carry up to 15 interchangeable cartridges, which were loaded into the front of the system. They came connected to three NES pads and a NES Zapper to let users experience the full functionality of Nintendo's machine, and a coin mechanism could also be attached to allow games to be played on a pay-for-time basis. Perhaps the most interesting thing about the FamicomBox, though, is that it is incompatible with traditional NES and Famicom cartridges. Instead, it has a very limited library of specially made black US-style cartridges, many of which have become just as sought after by collectors as the machine itself.



If it was only compatible with retail games, the FamicomBox would surely have been popular for its ability to function as a multichanger.

In terms of outputs, the FamicomBox isn't as user-friendly as its consumer-focused cousin.

Worth Playing?

THE FAMICOMBOX is clearly an item for the most serious collectors and avid Nintendo fanatics. Not only are they bulky and, let's be frank, pretty ugly, but the units are only compatible with a special run of custom-built cartridges that are becoming increasingly expensive and hard to track down.

Furthermore, these cartridges all contain the Japanese retail versions of their respective games, which further limits the system's appeal in the Western market to dedicated collectors. When you combine all these factors, it's clear that you'll need deep pockets and plenty of tolerance if you intend to start collecting for one.

Since it was released the year after the Famicom, the FamicomBox's library consists of the earliest games released for the system. A selection of titles given the black cart treatment include *Bomberman*, *Adventure Island*, *1943*, *Ice Climber*, *Mario Bros*, *Super Mario Bros*, *Duck Hunt*, *Excitebike*, *Ghosts 'N Goblins*, *Donkey Kong*, *Ice Climber*, *Donkey Kong Jr*, *Gradius*, *TwinBee*, *Baseball*, *Mahjong*, *Golf*, *F1 Race* and *Punch-Out!!*.

One of the rarest and most expensive carts to obtain for the unit is *Rockman* (*Mega Man*). In fact, a copy recently sold for over 34,000 yen (approximately £270) on a Japanese auction site.



This isn't a complete set of FamicomBox games, and it's unclear how many games were actually released on the format. At least 30 have confirmed FamicomBox versions.

Curiously, the controllers and Zapper are those of the NES rather than the Japanese Famicom designs.

FACT!

Electronics manufacturer Sharp also released a Famicom demonstration unit. Called the Famicom Station, it's distinguishable by its grey colour and metal stand.



I'VE GOT ONE

Name: **Jens Sommer**
Occupation: **Chemist**

What is it about the FamicomBox in particular that is attractive to you?
This unit was only released in Japan, and even then only in hotels and shops. Normal Famicom carts don't work in this unit, only special black carts that aren't very common.

How did you manage to track down the FamicomBox unit and your cartridges?
I buy items on eBay from time to time and bought a few items from a Dutch seller. I also attend a retro fair in Germany every year and so asked him if he was selling items there and could source a FamicomBox for me, which he did with five games. I bought some more cartridges during trips to Japan and some from eBay. The cartridge that I am most proud of is my *Rockman* cart, which is very hard to find but I paid only €80 for. I'm not sure the seller knew the value.

What condition was the FamicomBox in and how much did you pay for it?
There was a small crack in the right lower front, nearly not visible. But the fact there is a coin box attached compensated for this. Only 100-yen coins are accepted, by the way. You can play for a few minutes and then you need to pay 100 yen again. However, you can disconnect the coin box quite easily and play without paying.

Do you actually play on the FamicomBox and, if so, what do you think of it?
Of course, especially some of the very rare carts for the unit: *Rockman*, *Ice Climber*, *1943* and *Excitebike*. By the way, if someone owns and is looking to sell a *Punch-Out!!* black cart I would really appreciate it if you could contact me, as I am looking for this cart.

Finally, would you ever consider selling the unit or is it yours for life?
Straight question, straight answer: NO!

THE RETRO GUIDE TO... TIMESPLITTERS

From the creative minds behind Rare's GoldenEye 007 and Perfect Dark, TimeSplitters dispensed with the po-faced pomposity of the genre and enlivened it with quick gunplay and matching wits. games™ sat down with former Free Radical staffers Karl Hilton, Martin Wakeley, Ben Newman and Steve Ellis to talk about the franchise



■ Zombies with guns? *TimeSplitters* prided itself on its outlandish character designs.

■ Multiplayer took precedence during development as Free Radical aimed for a launch-window release.



■ Head onto YouTube and you'll find players speed-running missions in under a couple of minutes.

2000//TIMESPLITTERS



Was *TimeSplitters* an idea that you were developing before the formation of Free Radical Design?

STEVE ELLIS: No. In fact it wasn't even an idea that we had *when* we formed Free Radical. Our planned first game – and the game that Eidos signed us to develop – was an FPS with the working title *Redemption* that would take a couple of years to develop. It was only when the launch window for PlayStation 2 was moved back by six months that we started to think that we could possibly get a game out at launch.

KARL HILTON: Free Radical's original first project was later released as *Second Sight*. But when we realised we might have time to hit the launch of the PlayStation 2, we decided we wanted to make a simple, fast and fun multiplayer game. Having been happy with how much fun the multiplayer element of *GoldenEye* was, it seemed a good opportunity to evolve that type of game a bit further.

SE: This was some time around August 1999. We had been operating for four or five months and the PS2 launch had just moved back to September 2000, so we had one year. *TimeSplitters* was a product of what we believed we could do in the available time, and *Redemption* was put on hold.

What was the original reason behind your departure from Rare?

SE: A combination of various reasons, but mainly personal ambition. We wanted more control over our destiny and a larger share of the returns. We naively believed that we had been entirely responsible for the success of *GoldenEye* and felt undervalued by the company. It was only when we decided to do it ourselves that we learned about all of the critical things that must have been quietly going on the background to give us the freedom to create the game that we created. It's an environment that we strived – with varying success – to re-create at Free Radical.

KH: Just the usual one that I suspect most start-ups have. A desire for more creative freedom, a realisation we could make games on our own, for ourselves and hopefully collect the rewards if we did a good job. Rare was a great place to start in the industry, though.

MARTIN WAKELEY: Personally, I was looking for a new challenge. I had been at Rare for nearly a decade and things had changed radically. We no longer were partners with Nintendo and I made my decision to quit when Microsoft took over. That was no reflection on Microsoft; it just seemed a logical time to move on. The Free Radical boys were a real inspiration. They had built a company with a great reputation from scratch after a couple of years. What attracted me to Free Radical was they had the courage and foresight to start a company and run it with the values they wanted. I rang Graeme and said I wanted in, and after a few contractual issues with Microsoft I began on *Second Sight* as a project manager.

> "WE WERE CONSCIOUS THAT WE WERE A NEW COMPANY AND THAT MOST NEW COMPANIES FAIL" STEVE ELLIS

Was the game borne out of a desire to create an alternative first-person shooter experience off the back of *GoldenEye* and *Perfect Dark*?

SE: The multiplayer mode in *GoldenEye* was added at the last minute, so there were numerous features and ideas that we never got to try out. Also, the abilities of the Nintendo 64 were quite limiting. We had plenty of ideas for a multiplayer game that just couldn't be done on the N64. In the early PR for PS2 there was a lot of hype about its immense power – it would be able to render 75 million polygons per second, which would enable things like crowd scenes, so it seemed like an ideal platform for multiplayer gaming. We only learned later that it would have two controller ports instead of four.

KH: *TimeSplitters* was definitely inspired by and evolved from the experience and lessons of making those two previous games. As a new company, we felt it was important to get a game out in a

reasonable time and not get stuck in trying to do something too complex for our first project. The time constraint provided by the PS2 launch window was a perfect driver for this discipline.

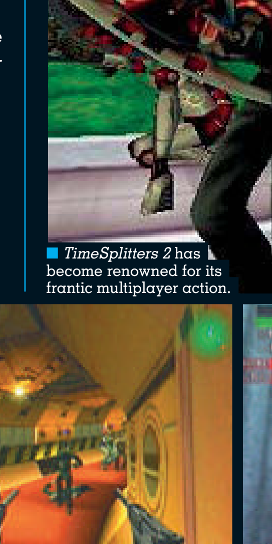
Did you think it would be compared to *GoldenEye* and *Perfect Dark*?

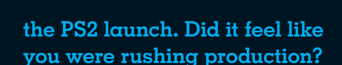
SE: I don't think we thought about that much at the time. I suppose it was inevitable that it would be compared, but our focus was on the future rather than the past. We had seen a lot of failed startups, with the failure often seeming to be caused by being too ambitious. We wanted to release our first game as soon as we could in order to prove that we could do it and that we had the discipline to know when to stop and ship.

KH: We hoped that gamers would understand the values we placed in our games based on our commitment to high-quality design and art delivered at the cutting edge of software development, which we had demonstrated with *GoldenEye* and *Perfect Dark*, but understand that *TimeSplitters* was an FPS focused on multiplayer fun rather than single-player story.

What was the inspiration for the dynamic cast of characters?

SE: From the start, one of the pillars of *TimeSplitters* was the diversity of its characters and environments. We wanted to make a sandbox that people could play in however they liked, without the constraints of a restrictive movie licence or a typical military FPS, and we happened to hire an incredibly talented and imaginative character artist named Ben Newman, who was working in an ice cream van at the time, having never used a computer. Most of the characters came from [him].





TimeSplitters 2 has become renowned for its frantic multiplayer action.

BEN NEWMAN: Yeah, it was great! Having the opportunity to design characters from so many genres and time periods all in one game was a dream job. Normally in a game I'm restricted to one style of design, like sci-fi or western, but *TimeSplitters* had them all, so it was constantly fun to work on. Also, the team of character artists was really strong; they were all good artists in their own right.

How did you try to distance yourself from PC shooters at the time?

KH: The most obvious method was through the controller. Playing PC FPSs with a mouse and keyboard produces a very different gameplay dynamic. We wanted fast 'twitch' gameplay, but with the added skill level that using an analogue controller required over the easier 'mouse aiming'. *TimeSplitters* was always meant to be about quick, gratifying gameplay with a group of friends around a console and TV rather than desk-based PC gaming.

***TimeSplitters* was made within 18 months of Free Radical opening and in time for the PS2 launch. Did it feel like you were rushing production?**

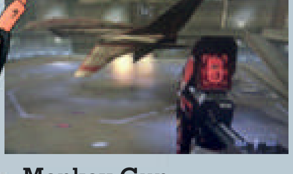
SE: We were conscious that we were a new company and that most new companies fail, so we wanted to prove ourselves as soon as possible. Yes, it was a tight deadline and there was a crunch period but it was an incredibly exciting time too. It was a small team and we were all pulling in the same direction, so it was far from the long, drawn-out death march that you often see these days.

One thing that we did was to only write code for exactly what we needed to do. We made a decision to not get distracted by what it might need to do in the future. So, for example, the code was geared towards the PS2 rather than having any kind of layer that might later be extended to other platforms. We knew we'd have to do those things later, but we took the shortest path to having a game on the shelves.

KH: We knew we had a short time frame in order to hit the PS2 launch, but we had a plan and most of us always felt we could deliver on time if we were sufficiently focused, so we got on with it. As our first product, we were very highly motivated to deliver something high quality, on time. It was hard work, but most of the time great fun, as the team was small and very creative. The team spirit was excellent.

THE MANY WEAPONS OF TIMESPLITTERS

GAMES™ TURNS ALL Q BRANCH AND ASSESSES THE BEST OF TIMESPLITTERS' ARSENAL



Monkey Gun

PRIMARY FIRE: Bananas

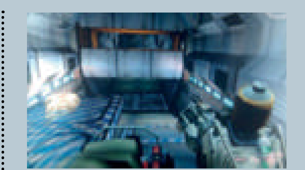
The most powerful automatic weapon in *Future Perfect*, firing 64 bananas in a second, it's also the fastest firing weapon in the game.



Brick

PRIMARY FIRE: Brick

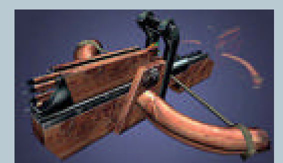
An extremely effective close-quarter weapon, the brick's ability to bounce off enemies means it'll carve a path through any messy situation. Just don't hit yourself.



Ghost Gun

PRIMARY FIRE: Beam

One of the series' more obscure offerings, this ghostbusting piece of kit is used to clear the Mansion of Madness of its spectral nuisances.



Crossbow

PRIMARY FIRE: Arrows

A relatively low-tech entry in the *TimeSplitters* arsenal, it's no less one of the most enticing. Set one of the bolts alight and watch the enemies burn.

How was the PS2 as a console to develop on compared to the Nintendo 64?
MW: From a design or project management perspective, consoles are consoles. So long as they have similar power, it makes no difference to me personally. I'm sure the tech guys would have a different opinion.
SE: I know that many developers didn't like it, but personally I have to say that it's the console platform that I've enjoyed most. As a developer, you had full, direct access to the hardware. There weren't any hoops to jump through, no layers of code to 'help' you, and the documentation was complete and accurate. These things are rare – too often you have to work with incomplete documentation and unreliable 'black box' APIs, and when something goes wrong, you don't have any way of finding out why, which is incredibly frustrating and unproductive. PS2 was also a Linux-based development environment, which fit in nicely with our Unix backgrounds.

Why did you concentrate on multiplayer?
KH: As a team, we really enjoyed multiplayer, from *GoldenEye* to other team favourites such as *Doom* and *Bomberman*, so there was a lot of enthusiasm to do multiplayer with real depth, quality and variety. It also required less time and resources than the complex storytelling of a single-player game, and we didn't feel we had time to do both in-depth and hit the launch date.
SE: In fact, we almost chose to make the game multiplayer-only, but it seemed too risky a move. However, few people questioned the fact that *Unreal Tournament* had no real single-player mode, so maybe we should have.

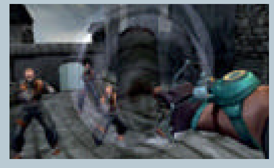


TimeSplitters 2 significantly expanded the single-player experience, but the multiplayer was still the main draw.

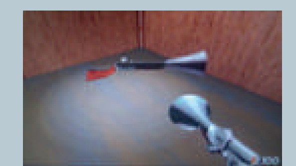
2002//TIMESPLITTERS 2

Did you want to silence the naysayers with the sequel and really address criticisms to do with the single-player?
KH: We didn't care too much about 'naysayers'. We delivered the best game we could in the time available and we were well aware of its limitations, so we were very keen to improve on the single-player element of the game. We were certain gamers didn't think we'd 'forgotten' how to make an immersive, story-driven single-player game. I think we proved that with both *TimeSplitters 2* and *Second Sight*.
SE: A decent single-player game was never really an option in the first game because of time and resource constraints – to make a really good single-player game you need plenty of time iterating on the gameplay. I'd say you need more than a year from the point when most of the necessary features are implemented. With the first game we had a minimal single-player feature set and only about three weeks to set up 18 or so levels. With the second game we had most of the features in place by mid-2001, so we had more than a year left to set up and polish the single-player.

What questions were asked when going into the sequel? What needed to stay, what needed to improve and why?
KH: Our main idea was to improve all the features we had developed for the first one such as the map maker and the challenge modes, but also to deliver a more thorough and well-rounded single-player story mode. We also wanted to develop some of the more popular characters a bit and flesh them out as personalities within the game world.
BN: Generally I was just told what each of the time periods were going to be for each level, and then I went away and came up with a load of characters that I thought would be cool for that setting. The two main



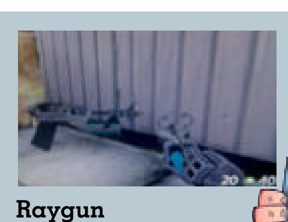
Temporal Uplink
PRIMARY FIRE: N/A
A small handheld computer in *TimeSplitters 2* became a wrist-mounted weapon in *Future Perfect*, with the ability to hurl objects at enemies.



Blunderbuss
PRIMARY FIRE: Shells
Even as one of the worst firearms in the game, there's still a certain charm to the blunderbuss. Useless at anything except breathing distance.

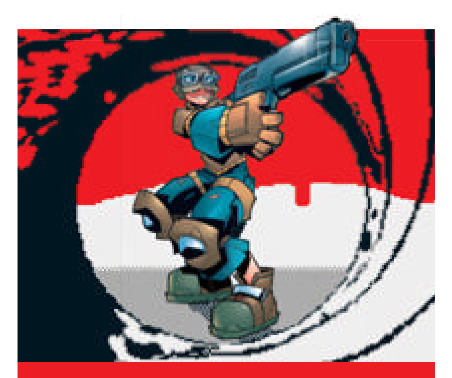


Lasergun
PRIMARY FIRE: Laser
One of the many sci-fi weapons found in the game. Hold the fire button and unleash a powerful shot that instantly hits the target at medium range.



Raygun
PRIMARY FIRE: Plasma
Boasting a Fifties B-movie vibe, the Raygun might as well be a movie prop for all the good it does. Still, great at clearing crowded corridors.





THE PERFECT BOND

THE MANY REFERENCES TO GOLDENEYE AND PERFECT DARK THAT APPEAR THROUGHOUT TIMESPLITTERS

THE HEALTH SYSTEM



IT COULD be argued that this is more of a Free Radical trademark than an overt reference to the studio's previous shooters, but as the FPS genre was gradually transitioning to the regenerative health system, the sidebar health meters felt more like a deliberate throwback.

SIBERIA



SIBERIA HAS a few nods to James Bond's N64 outing. The most obvious is the fact that the whole level is a clear homage to *GoldenEye*'s starting mission. There are also smaller references throughout the stage, including sound effects and items that give the whole shebang a 007 vibe.

BREAKING AND ENTERING



THOUGH PERHAPS not as overt as Siberia in its reference, there's nevertheless a palpable similarity between *Future Perfect*'s 2052 stage and the opening of Joanna Dark's debut. Nothing says shady future organisation like metallic walls and big plate-glass windows.

KHALLOS EXPRESS



WE MAINTAIN that there's no such thing as a bad train level, and Free Radical has yet to prove us wrong. *GoldenEye*'s is perhaps the game's finest, and *Future Perfect* emulates it with another intense entanglement. Keep an eye out for a picture of Joanna Dark in one of the bathroom stalls.

male and female characters came first, then the standard enemy characters, and then for each level there were normally a few silly characters as well. I was left pretty free to just come up with whatever I wanted in terms of the character design.

The sequel was a more impressive technical feat. Was it a case of being more familiar with the hardware?

SE: Yes. As we finished work on the first game, I had a number of ideas for technical improvements that I wanted to try out, but they required more work than we had remaining time, so they had to wait. When we started the sequel, the first thing I did was to overhaul the engine and double the polygon throughput – the last major piece of programming that I was able to do at Free Radical. After that, the growing size of the company meant that my focus had to switch to management.

It was rumoured that the PS2's CPU imposed limitations on development. Did you struggle with getting the most out of Sony's hardware?

SE: Not really. Every platform has its challenges, but our ethos was always to establish the limits early on in a project and work within them, rather than making the game first and then trying to get it to fit into the limits.

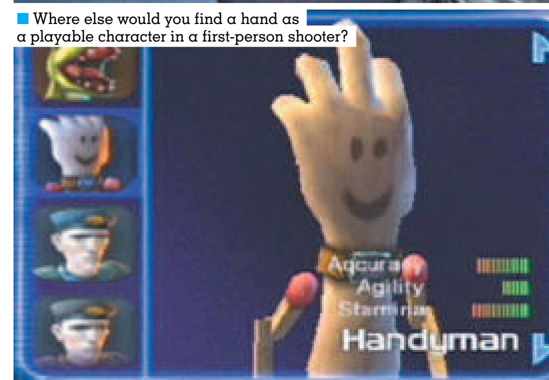
How about the importance of Sony's iLink? Was the pre-release promotion of that pressed upon you at the time?

SE: [Laughs] Yes, iLink. I'd forgotten about that. Probably nobody ever used it and it was removed from later PS2 models to cut costs. It was never going to be a huge selling point, but we wanted to make a real networked game and iLink is as close as we could get. We actually had iLink working at the end of *TimeSplitters 1*, but for one reason or another – probably QA, but I can't really remember – we weren't able to launch with it. A similar thing happened with *TimeSplitters 2* – we had online multiplayer 99 per cent implemented, but we were a little too early with that too – nobody was ready on the publishing/platform side – so that had to wait until *TimeSplitters: Future Perfect*.

What were the fundamental design principles when it came to the multiplayer in *TimeSplitters 2*?



One of the most distinctive aspects of the franchise is the diverse character designs.



Where else would you find a hand as a playable character in a first-person shooter?



> "HOPEFULLY MOST GAMERS APPRECIATED THAT IT WAS JUST UNPRETENTIOUS GOOD FUN" KARL HILTON



The idea of a map builder in a console FPS was unheard of at the time.

KH: Flexibility was a core idea. We wanted to enable players to create as many interesting and different scenarios as possible and not restrict with worries about balancing or consistency. The huge number of characters, time periods, weapons and the map maker offered a huge potential for variety

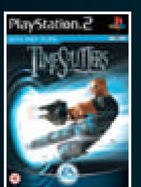
SE: I don't remember having any specific principles – or any formal 'design', for that matter. It was fairly organic. People would come up with ideas and we would try them out. If they worked, we used them.

Why do you think the multiplayer in the *TimeSplitters* series has such an enduring legacy?

SE: I think it offers something that most other games don't. It doesn't try to conform to the norms of the genre.

KH: For all the reasons I mentioned in the previous answer. *TimeSplitters* allowed people to be creative with the map maker and silly with the characters, weapons and game modes. Hopefully most gamers appreciated that it was just unpretentious good fun. It was cutting edge in some ways, and 'old school' in others.

2005//TIMESPLITTERS: FUTURE PERFECT



Why do you think the third *TimeSplitters* wasn't as well received as its predecessors?

KH: That's a difficult one. It was a more 'complete' game, both in terms of content and technically, especially with the online functionality, which was particularly good for the map maker. Some fans seemed to think that Free Radical Design hadn't made it and that EA had developed it, which was not true. Ultimately, the slightly disappointing sales figures for *TimeSplitters: Future Perfect* damaged the prospects for a fourth game, as potential publishers could see the franchise not moving in the right direction. Personally, I think it was the best one we did.

SE: Its focus was quite different. More time was spent developing the single-player game and less time on multiplayer, which is probably not what people expected of *TimeSplitters*. The move to working with EA was the main reason for this. My take on it is that EA wanted to work with us not because they had played and liked *TimeSplitters 2*, but because they had seen the review scores for *TimeSplitters 2* and believed that they could sell more units than Eidos of any game with those scores. I doubt that they looked at the game at all. Soon after we started working with them, it became apparent that they had a very different way of working to us. Their method was to identify what they called 'the X' – the defining feature of the game that could be summarised in a few words on the back of the box – and then focus as much effort as possible on reinforcing that 'X'.

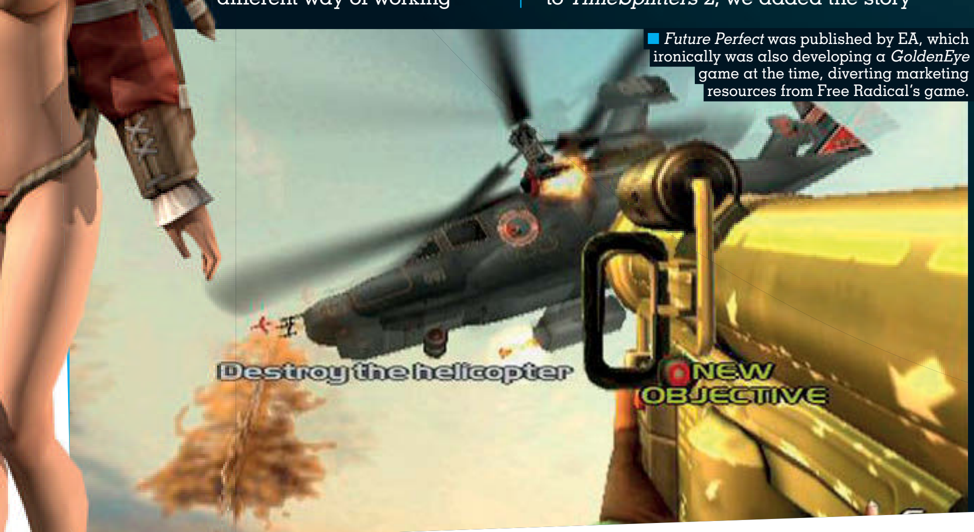
This didn't sit well with *TimeSplitters* because it was all about choice, diversity, freedom – there was no one thing that they thought they could hang a marketing campaign off. Eventually they came up with 'blast your way through time', and we were instructed that we needed to focus our efforts on the time-travelling single-player. The multiplayer was considered unimportant, almost an inconvenience due to the amount of QA that it required – you can't test a multiplayer game without multiple players – so it didn't have as much attention as it deserved. I wonder if that was the right decision.

Did the publisher switch from Eidos to EA affect development?

BN: Not for the character team. The only thing I remember EA being adamant about was that Cortez had to be wearing black. Other than that, it was business as usual. People seem to consider *Future Perfect* to be the weakest, but in terms of character design I think it's the strongest.

The single-player differed from the previous games, as it focused on Cortez as the lead playable character. What was the decision behind this?

SE: As we moved from *TimeSplitters* to *TimeSplitters 2*, we added the story



Future Perfect was published by EA, which ironically was also developing a *GoldenEye* game at the time, diverting marketing resources from Free Radical's game.

mode. Going forward to *Future Perfect*, we definitely wanted to take this further but I don't think it was our intention at the start to have the kind of story that we ended up with. We probably would have had a story more like the one in *TimeSplitters 2* if it was left to us. The move to EA was the main reason we went down the path that we did. My feeling is that EA wanted to work with us not because they had seen *TimeSplitters 2* and liked it, but because they had seen the review scores and liked them. I don't think they knew anything about the game, but [they] were very persuasive.

However, they also believed that in order to do their magic, the game needed to conform to the way that they make and market games. It needed to have a lead character that they could put on the front of the box. It needed to have a single core 'thing' that they could write in a few words on the back of the box, and all of our effort needed to go into supporting that 'X' rather than other things like the map maker and multiplayer.

We weren't allowed to have 'choice, freedom, variety, diversity, fun, sandbox' as our 'X', which are what *TimeSplitters* was about. Apparently you can't market those things, so in the end the 'X' that they arrived at was 'blast your way through time', and we had to add the time-travelling narrative and spend most of our time working on that, to the detriment of everything else.

In *TimeSplitters 2* and *Future Perfect*, the map maker evolved into one of the franchise's most interesting features. How did the idea develop?

SE: It was a fun idea that we had while we were making the first game. We wanted to give the players a sandbox in which they could do whatever they wanted, but we also wanted to make it simple enough that almost anyone could achieve something with it reasonably easily. In retrospect, given the limited time and resources that we had, I can't believe that we actually did it. Once it was in, it was only natural to develop it further in the subsequent games. It was never popular with the publishers, though. They saw it – possibly correctly – as a niche feature that required a disproportionate amount of testing. However, we were reluctant to let it go and they did allow us to keep it. I think it was a little ahead of its time in that it wasn't even online until *Future Perfect* and people weren't really accustomed to the idea of user-created content. However, it was nice to see a core group of people who found ways to share *TimeSplitters 2* maps online through websites, and it was always interesting to see the kind of things that people managed to do with it.

Do you feel enough was done in the marketing on EA's side?

SE: They could have done more, but in the run-up to the launch they told us that they had decided to spend less than they had previously intended. They had [*GoldenEye: Rogue Agent*] releasing and their logic was that for every dollar of marketing they would get a better return from *GoldenEye* than from *TimeSplitters*, so they spent their money on that instead. I like to think that they were wrong, but who knows?



By the time *TimeSplitters* reached its third entry, it had featured 274 different characters.

> "I DON'T THINK EA KNEW ANYTHING ABOUT THE GAME, BUT THEY BELIEVED THAT THEY COULD SELL MILLIONS" STEVE ELLIS

201X//TIMESPLITTERS 4?



Whatever happened to *TimeSplitters 4*?

MW: I think it's been covered at length elsewhere, but in simple terms we couldn't find anyone who was willing to fund the continuation of the project.

Was that during the last days of Free Radical Design?

SE: That's a very long story. Many factors came together to contribute to the situation – we'd had difficulties with *Haze*, we hadn't managed to find backing for *TimeSplitters 4*, LucasArts had a sudden change of management and then cancelled two projects that we were developing for them and a couple of other interesting opportunities – a *James Bond* project and an acquisition – didn't work out. It was the run-up to Christmas, so publishers were focused on their holiday releases rather than signing new projects, and also most of the world was in recession. If any of these things had not happened, we may have survived, but all coming together it just wasn't possible to continue.

And then Crytek came along and acquired the company…

MW: Once the company was up for sale we saw a few potential buyers come and view the studio. Rebellion were first up and they showed us some pictures of them jousting. Crytek came next and they were great. I have a lot of time for the Yerlis. Avni is a great guy and they immediately put us at ease. We knew about their great tech and they were happy for us to stay as an autonomous unit. They were the unanimous preferred option.

So, do you think that *TimeSplitters 4* could still happen in the future? That would be pretty cool, right?

KH: *TimeSplitters* is now part of Crytek. Cevat Yerli has gone on record as saying he'd like to do something with it in the future, but it has to be the right new approach to make it relevant to gamers today. It's been a long time since *Future Perfect* came out.

THE TIMESPLITTERS TIMEMAP

UNTANGLING THE KNOTTED TIME-JUMPING OF THE FRANCHISE

TIMESPLITTERS
TIMESPLITTERS 2
TIMESPLITTERS: FUTURE PERFECT

1920 AZTEC RUINS
1924 KRONIAM
1924 SCOTLAND
1932 CHICAGO
1935 EGYPT
1950 UK
1966 MANSION
1969 RUSSIA
1972 KHALLOS ISLAND
1985 USA

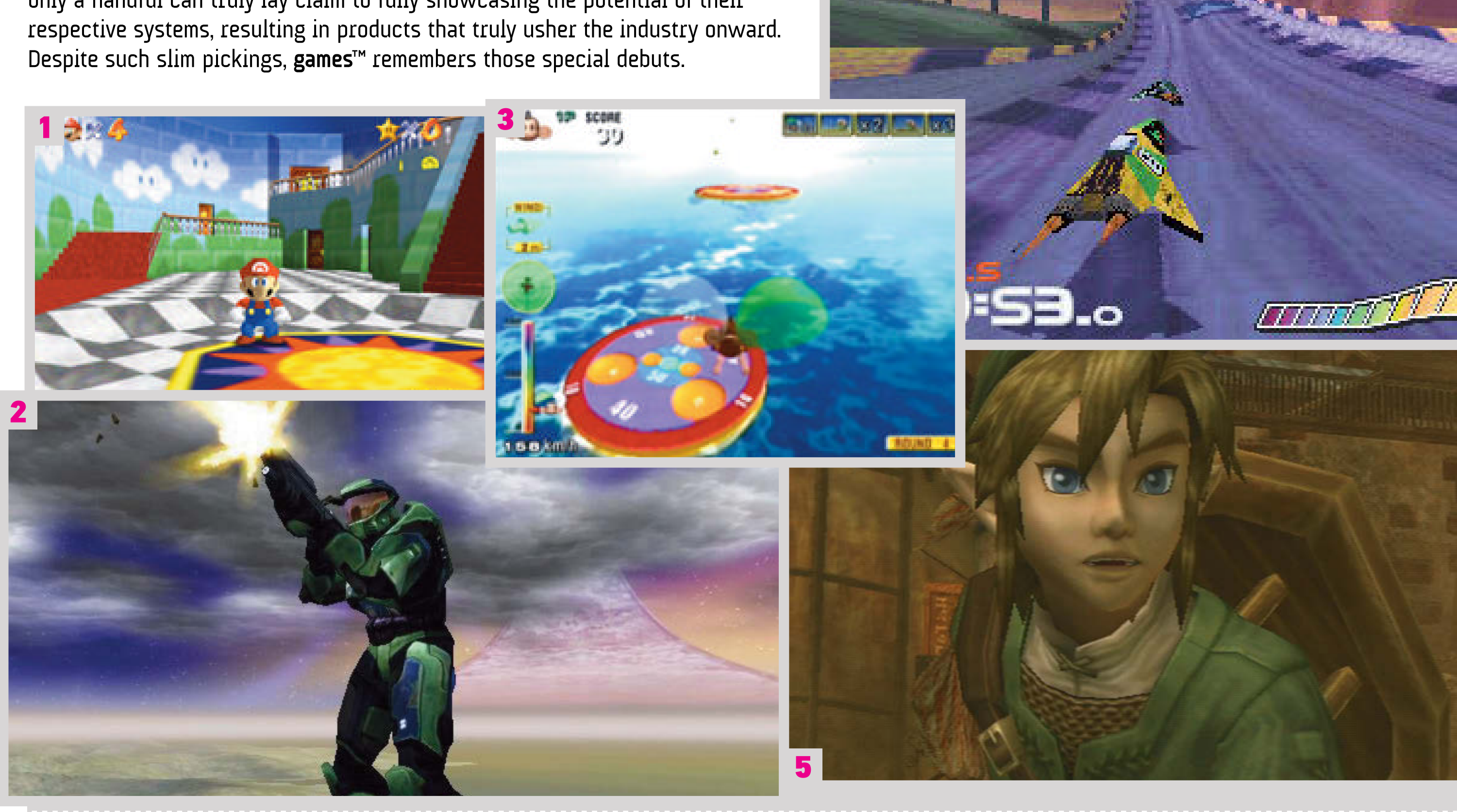
1853 1895 1920 1924 1932 1935 1950 1966 1969 1970 1972 1985 1990 1994 2000 2005 2019 2020 2035 2052 2243 2280 2315 2401

1990 SIBERIA
1994 USA
2000 FRANCE
2005 CYBERDEN
2020 PLANET X
2035 SPACEWAYS
2052 U-GENIX, USA
2243 ULTRANET COMPLEX, USA
2280 PLANET X
2315 ROBOT FACTORY, USA
2401 SPACE STATION

ESSENTIALS

10 OF THE BEST LAUNCH TITLES

Hardware launches are notoriously tricky to master. Regardless of how impressive the console is, true judgement of whether a launch has been a success is reserved for the software line-up. Looking back, it's fair to say that only a handful can truly lay claim to fully showcasing the potential of their respective systems, resulting in products that truly usher the industry onward. Despite such slim pickings, **games**™ remembers those special debuts.



Super Mario 64
Console: Nintendo 64
Year: 1996

1 Not just a great launch title, but one of the finest games ever made. Mario really showed everyone else how it was done, head-stomping contemporary gaming into a rich new era of 3D platforming with magnificent aplomb. The camera control scheme itself would be enough of a revolution, but the sheer open-endedness to *Super Mario 64*'s level design, simply put, blazed trails. It's going to take something special from the Wii U if Nintendo hopes to top the portly plumber's dizzying efforts on the Nintendo 64… but sadly we don't think it has what it takes.

Halo: Combat Evolved
Console: Xbox
Year: 2001

2 *Halo* was Microsoft's killer app come the Xbox launch. First-person shooters had predominantly been a genre reserved for PC gaming, but that all changed when *Halo* arrived, challenging the established and shifting the boundaries of what's possible on consoles. Bungie was an almost unknown entity at the time, but the studio effectively emulated Valve's success by eschewing routine gunfights with big set pieces set against a dense sci-fi universe. Microsoft's flagship shooter has yet to recapture that same sense of awe, innovation and majesty in its subsequent sequels, but back then the Chief was certainly the master.

Super Monkey Ball
Console: GameCube
Year: 2001

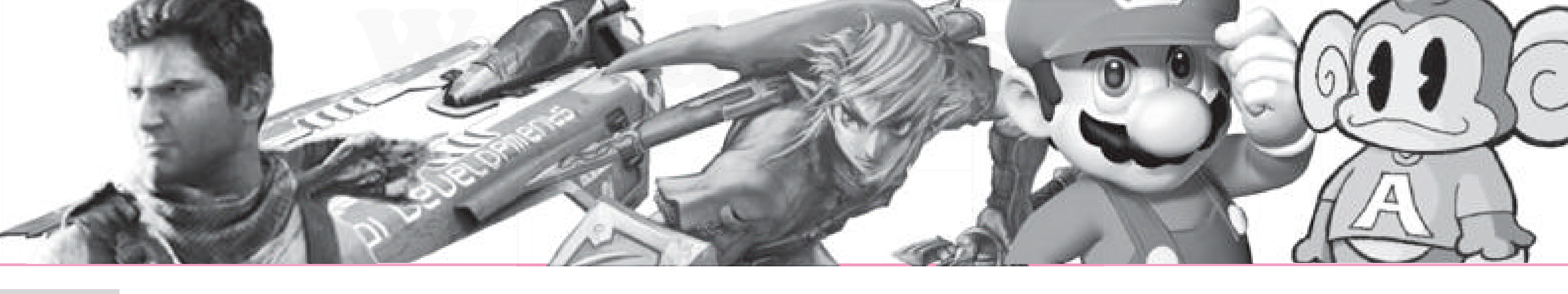
3 With *Mario* absent on launch day, Nintendo's underappreciated purple box was left relying on one ghoulish adventure starring Luigi and a meagre selection of third-party software to shift units off the shelves. Cream of the crop was Sega's *Super Monkey Ball*. Ostensibly *Marble Madness* in a furry guise, the clear distinction is monkeys. Lots of them. It also had Monkey Target, which as far as competitive family-friendly multiplayer is concerned, reigns supreme.

WipEout
Console: PlayStation
Year: 1995

4 In a nightmarish era where smoky cesspits blared out noisy techno-rubbish and fluffy-haired shellsuits danced around waving silly glow sticks on a typical Saturday night, no other game encapsulated the misguided exuberance of Nineties youth like *WipEout*. Found in some dark corner of many a garish nightclub, *WipEout*'s disorienting speed and contemporary soundtrack burrowed straight into the public zeitgeist. You think videogames are for kids? Not any more.

Zelda: Twilight Princess
Console: Wii
Year: 2006

5 Originally solely a GameCube release, *Twilight Princess* was never intended to be a Wii title at all. But the bewitching possibilities of the Wii Remote were enough to persuade Eiji Aonuma to create a version for the Wii, and it's one that we're sure Nintendo was eternally grateful for. Without this sublime return to Hyrule, it's unlikely the majority of Nintendo purists, who would have been left cold once the novelty of *Wii Sports* had worn off, would have so favourably received the Wii.



Tetris
Console: Game Boy
Year: 1989

6 While handheld consoles have undergone a significant evolution in the years since Nintendo released its portable grey wonder, one thing has always remained consistent: the allure of the puzzle game. In that regard, *Tetris* is by far the most substantial and important handheld release ever made. Not just an extremely accessible, absorbing and challenging experience, but it broadened the market to a whole new casual audience. Nintendo has got pretty good at that over the years.

Super Mario World
Console: SNES
Year: 1990

7 Every Nintendo console launch can be characterised by the *Mario* game accompanying it – or the lack thereof, as the case may be. *Super Mario World* demonstrated the variety, vibrancy and surprises that the SNES had to offer, successfully twisting the established into something wholly rejuvenating. Alongside introducing several conventions that would follow through the series to date, it also welcomed Mario's sidekick and steadfast transportation Yoshi, for which we'll forever be grateful.

Panzer Dragoon
Console: Sega Saturn
Year: 1995

8 It's easy to forget the Sega Saturn. It was unfortunately released in European territories just prior to the original PlayStation, and Sony's new system resulted in stalled sales of the Saturn in PAL territories. *Panzer Dragoon* therefore never received the full attention it deserved over here. Surreal, stylish and featuring one of the best videogame soundtracks of the Nineties, this injustice could have easily been avoided if Sega's console reached the market several months earlier. Alas, it shall remain a hidden jewel among Sega's roster of licences.

Power Stone
Console: Dreamcast
Year: 1999

9 In *Power Stone*, Capcom completely re-established the way 3D fighting games should be made, and found itself at the forefront of a new era in the genre. It couldn't have been better timed either, as Sega's Dreamcast was the first to really make 3D graphics shine on home consoles. *Power Stone*'s rich textures, slick animations and artistry really came into its own and firmly put the Dreamcast on the cutting edge of the latest gaming hardware.

Uncharted: Golden Abyss
Console: PS Vita
Year: 2011

10 Cautious after Nintendo's muted 3DS launch a year earlier, Sony knew it would have to bring something special to the launch of its second handheld if it wanted to avoid similar indifference from fans. Luckily, Nathan Drake was more than up for the challenge. Proving that the Vita could pump out dazzling visuals not far behind those of the PlayStation 3, *Uncharted: Golden Abyss* was true home console gaming on the go. The possibilities on where handheld gaming goes next seem positively endless.





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WORLD OF WARPLANES
The follow-up to World Of Tanks detailed in full
WORLD OF WARGAMING
The fast-growing MMO developer talks tanks, boats and warplanes
WorldMags.net



WORLD OF TANKS

THE BEST OF BRITISH COMES TO WOT

We're watching a real-life 56-ton Chieftain battle tank crush a Ford saloon at the grand finale of the *World Of Tanks* British tanks launch event. At first it slows, but the car's body quickly crumples like paper, while its windscreen shatters into a thousand screaming slivers under the behemoth's relentless power. Watching the spectacle, it's hard not to draw parallels with the way Belarusian developer Wargaming.net's *World Of Tanks* – the freemium MMO tank shooter, which throws players into fast-paced 30-on-30 combat with World War II tanks and sports an RPG-style unlock system – has become an unstoppable gaming juggernaut since its launch in 2010. The MMO simulation is now played in more than 205 countries by over 40 million registered players and holds two entries in *Guinness World Records*, including the largest number of players simultaneously online on one MMO server – a whopping 105,000. *WOT* is a big player on the MMO gaming front, and the latest addition to its battle chest is the inclusion of British tanks in its 8.1 update, which brings the nation that created tanks into its stable alongside the USA, Germany, France and the Soviet Union.

One of *WOT*'s major attractions has always been its tanks' historical accuracy, coupled with play that's still almost arcade-like on the surface. "Of course, the British tank tree features all those iconic British tanks from World War II," promises Wargaming.net CEO Victor Kislyi of this latest update. "The 'Great Five': the Matilda, Churchill, Centurion, Comet and Cromwell." Wargaming.net's usual practice is to initially release 22 machines in an upgrade, and that's again the case, with two main branches of British heavy and medium tanks, and the artillery and tank destroyer units released later. At launch, players can jump in with this first batch and begin levelling up their crews in preparation for the next wave. Like every other nation, players start with a tiny Tier 1 machine and can earn XP towards Tier 10 behemoths, which are often post-war prototypes that never actually saw service, like the FV215.

No single feature unites the British tanks as a group, but Kislyi describes them as "combining German precision with American mobility", and, playing them, it feels very much that way. As a rule, they aren't particularly heavily armoured but often have an edge in mobility that makes all the difference. Even better, their guns are quite precise and have good armour penetration.

They also come with nation-specific benefits, like the ability to equip a vertical stabiliser on tanks for greater accuracy while moving at level 7 or 8, as opposed to other nations, which only get access to that buffing equipment at level 9. Other little national idiosyncrasies include the Matilda, which is arguably the best Tier 4 tank in the game. Balancing is a critical part of *WOT*, and British tanks will continue to evolve in the game.

"BALANCING, WELL, THAT is rocket science," says Kislyi. "It's crucial in any MMO or PvP game and with *WOT* in particular. We have this dilemma. There is historical accuracy and there is gameplay. Frankly speaking, we give a little more priority to gameplay." The *WOT* statistics department collects mountains of data and analyses it to ensure all machines on a tier have similar stats. "If one machine is a statistical anomaly, it's wrong," Kislyi explains. "Sometimes we nerf or up certain tanks to correct that, and of course players always see conspiracy. 'Oh, you hate French tanks! Or American tanks! You're Russians! That's why you love Russian tanks!' they say. But no, we're grown-ups and it's all about statistics."

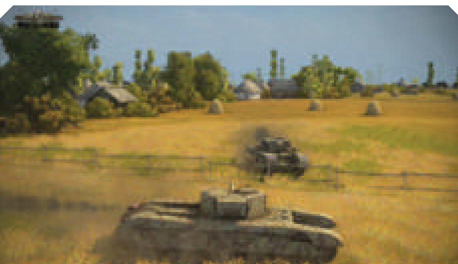
Most MMOs are products of constant iteration, and Wargaming.net seems especially effective at it. The biggest

INFORMATION

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **Wargaming.net**
DEVELOPER: **In-house**
ORIGIN: **Belarus**



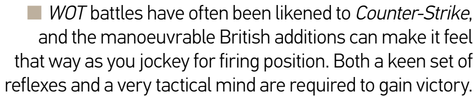
It's not just the tanks that have a British character. 8.1 includes new expendables like 'pudding and tea', which gives British crews a 10 per cent bonus – bumped to 20 per cent if consumed at five o'clock.



Team play and a good knowledge of your tank's abilities are the hallmark of a good player. They can make the difference between regular experience and having to grind.

"British tanks aren't particularly heavily armoured but often have an edge in mobility"







WOT battles have often been likened to *Counter-Strike*, and the manoeuvrable British additions can make it feel that way as you jockey for firing position. Both a keen set of reflexes and a very tactical mind are required to gain victory.

component of the previous 8.0 update was realistic tank physics, and combat in *WOT* has always been about clever movement and positioning – you're effectively trying to get a big, mobile gun into the best position to strike enemies' vulnerable spots, while avoiding return fire. Tanks can now jump, ram and push each other in a realistic and often tactical fashion, and it's a fresh gameplay element that can be used to great effect with British machines. During a play session we outmanoeuvred and knocked a larger German opponent into the lake we were battling beside, sending him to a watery grave.

"Your tactics and strategies have totally changed and taken on a new dimension since 8.0," says Kislyi. "It's almost a new game. It feels more like real life, and often like a movie." That realistic element is augmented by the team's continuous upgrading of *WOT*'s engine, and it shows in the improved dynamic shading of tanks, trees and buildings in 8.1.

WOT saw an increase in player numbers after the 8.0 update, and the slew of new goodies in 8.1 merely add more. "You can stop and start whenever you want, and the game is free. You can play all the way up to Tier 10 tanks without paying us a penny," explains Kislyi of its allure. "Battles last for five or ten minutes. You always get XP and credits, go back to your garage in seconds, upgrade one or buy another tank, and jump into another battle immediately." Its accessibility and optional simulation layers make *WOT* attractive. "If you're a busy man you can quickly and easily play a few battles during the day," he says. "If you're a schoolboy you can spend all day just playing *World Of Tanks*. That's the beauty – it's up to you."

THE WAR RECORD

With the British tanks update to *World Of Tanks*, Wargaming.net has implemented a whole new range of post-game statistics that players can delve into after matches to improve their battlefield performance. This includes things like how many tanks a player destroyed, which tank's armour your shells penetrated, who you did critical damage to, what assists you gave your team, damage inflicted and received, and even how much experience everyone gained as part of the battle. It's the kind of minutiae and detail that's enough to make your head spin, but exactly what fans wanted. In future, a dedicated spectator mode will be added, and there's even the possibility of a connection to social apps like Twitter and Facebook for boasting.

MMO UPDATES

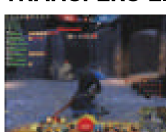
THE LATEST DEVELOPMENTS IN THE WORLD OF ONLINE GAMING

IS SCARLET BLADE LUCKY NUMBER 13?



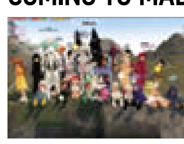
Aeria Games, the prolific US free-to-play browser MMORPG publisher, is developing *Scarlet Blade*, which will sport an all-female cast, clad in skimpy warrior attire. *Scarlet Blade* will be the constantly busy publisher's thirteenth MMO if you count from its Asian founding in 2006, and you can jump into the open beta right now.

GUILD WARS 2: FREE WORLD TRANSFERS LIMITED



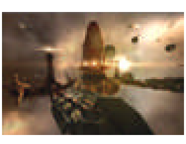
In an effort to reduce the effect of constant transfers upon *Guild Wars 2*'s World vs World system, ArenaNet has introduced a rule limiting players' ability to transfer worlds to once every seven days, as opposed to the previous once every 24 hours. The developer is actively working on getting guest functionality in place so players can still join friends.

SAME-SEX MARRIAGE COMING TO MABINOGI



By the time you read this, Nexon America will have released the latest update to fantasy MMO *Mabinogi*. As well as introducing a new Puppeteer talent and new mount, it will bring changes to *Mabinogi*'s wedding system, allowing marriages between players of the same sex. It's nice to see the MMO crowd being as progressive as the rest of society, eh?

EVE ONLINE BUDDY SYSTEM EXTENDED



CCP has introduced key changes to its *Eve Online* buddy system. Previously, the scheme rewarded both parties whenever a referred player upgraded to the full game, and while the new one still does, it now also allows the referrer to invite lots of friends, with their unique referral URL used multiple times.



The idea of a Wargaming.net universe in which your XP can be freely traded between games, and battles could impact on each other, is a unique and exciting prospect.





WORLD OF WARPLANES AND WORLD OF WARSHIPS

WITH THE TANK WAR WON, WARGAMING.NET FINDS OTHER REALMS TO CONQUER

Given the massive success of *World Of Tanks*, it's hardly surprising that Wargaming.net is developing similarly themed free-to-play action MMOs, but it's being careful about expansion and has an innovative overall plan to tie all Wargaming.net games together in a meaningful way.

World Of Warplanes is currently in beta, and takes *World Of Tanks*' fast-paced team battle and upgradable RPG approach into the skies with a bevy of historically accurate World War II fighter planes.

Players will dogfight with aircraft from countries like the USA, Soviet Union and Germany at launch, with British and Japanese aircraft promised later. *World Of Warplanes* is already highly addictive, sporting a much faster, even more arcadey pace than *World Of Tanks*, but brings the same attention to detail to bear in things like individually destructible plane components and an impressive physics engine. But Wargaming.net is being very careful about the development of its new fighter game.

INFORMATION

FORMAT: PC
PUBLISHER: Wargaming.net
DEVELOPER: In-house
ORIGIN: Belarus

"With *WOT*, nobody was expecting anything from us," explains Wargaming.net CEO Victor Kislyi. "We were just a small team out of Europe, and we could afford for there to be some rough edges in the game. *WOT* wasn't perfect; we had this opportunity to release what we had and build upon it. With *WOWP* we don't have that luxury; we can literally feel cameras and microphones pointed at *World Of Warplanes*. The media, the industry, our players, they expect nothing but top-notch quality in everything – graphics, sound, controls, content and everything – so we have to polish *World Of Warplanes* to a gleaming finish. That's our first priority."

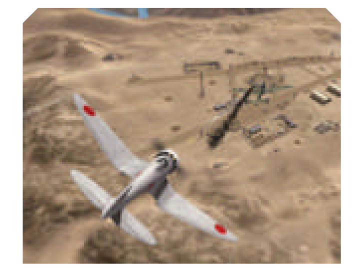
The current focus on *WOWP* means that not many new details beyond those revealed at this year's E3 are being given on Wargaming.net's upcoming third game, *World Of Warships*, but it takes the developer's proven formula into a naval setting. With massive battleships in several different classes and a similar approach to upgrades and progression, it promises to be a slower game, but one with even more detail as you manage the systems of your warship in battle.

The future plans that Wargaming.net is willing to talk about are its intention to make its infrastructure a unified online gaming system in the vein of Blizzard's Battle.net, not only promising similar functionality but gameplay elements that go way beyond it. Players will have one universal login for *World Of Tanks*, *World Of Warplanes* and *World Of Warships* and be able to manage their gold, purchases and customisable items, as well as their tank, ship and plane crews, in one place. They will also get their statistics presented in every permutation imaginable and be able to enter tournaments

NO RETREAT! F2P FOREVER!

"We will never come back to the retail box or subscription model," declares Kislyi of Wargaming.net's free-to-play strategy. "It isn't fair. You see, it's good that we put ourselves in a position in which there is no way we can fool our players. The game is free. When you download and install the game there is no £50 emotional attachment. We don't take anything from you before you try the game and play it for some time before you make sure that you like it."

It's hard to argue with Wargaming.net's success with this philosophy, and Kislyi believes that, in future, only certain huge franchises will stay in the retail sphere. "Having been there, really for an independent, medium-sized developer, there is absolutely no chance of making money with retail product," he claims. "Sometimes miracles happen, but in general terms that model is doomed."



The success of the *WOT* free-to-play model has allowed Wargaming.net to branch out into new games like *World Of Warplanes*, which promises a very different gameplay take on the formula.



World Of Warships promises to be a more methodical game than the other two, but one with great scope for gameplay depth, giving players the components to control and tinker with on a battleship.

through it. But according to Kislyi, key to the Wargaming.net system will be players' ability to transfer experience points between its three separate games.

"It's something really unique that no other company has," he claims. "We'll have three games – *Tanks*, *Warplanes* and *Warships* – and when you play *Tanks* you get experience points, and you'll be able to transfer [them] across to *Warplanes* or *Warships*, to help unlock your tech tree to get access to higher-level aircraft or ships. When all three games are running, your normal everyday routine might be a bit of *Tanks* before you go to work, at lunchtime you'll take to the skies in a couple of quick plane battles, and then on a lazy sunny Sunday afternoon when you don't feel like moving very fast you might want to jump into one or two ship battles because they're slower."

While fans have speculated that all three games could one day be directly joined, Kislyi says that's more likely to be a different future game. Nonetheless, Wargaming.net still plans for its system to have gameplay impact beyond mere XP transferral.

"The second level of integration will take place on a clan warfare level," Kislyi suggests. "Our plans haven't been finalised, but the idea is this: If a clan attacks a Moscow map, before a tank battle an air battle takes place. My clan members jump into planes or we have an allied friendly clan, and they fight in the air. If my clan or its allies win, in the upcoming tank battle we get some kind of bonus – for example, off-map aerial bombing. Or we get a recon flight, which gives visibility over a certain area of the map for 30 seconds. Battleships will obviously, on a strategic level, control areas of the sea, so, for example, if your naval team wins you will get naval gun support for that battle. This sort of thing would be the first step."

It's an exciting idea, and one that promises to present players with an epic universe of battle unlike any other. Playing in both *World Of Tanks* and the open beta for *World Of Warplanes*, which we encourage players to jump into, it's already looking increasingly like the sky, and beyond, could be the limit for Wargaming.net in the future.



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Congratulations… you monster.

Another test begins 20 December 2012_